An island off the coast of America: New York City symphonies as productions of space and narrative

Erica Hillary Stein

University of Iowa

Copyright 2011 Erica Stein

This dissertation is available at Iowa Research Online: http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/1181

Recommended Citation


Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons
AN ISLAND OFF THE COAST OF AMERICA: NEW YORK CITY SYMPHONIES AS PRODUCTIONS OF SPACE AND NARRATIVE

by

Erica Hillary Stein

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Film Studies in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

July 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Lauren Rabinovitz
This dissertation analyzes the group of postwar (1948-1964) independent films known as the New York city symphonies and argues that the films, rather than merely depicting space, produce it. City symphonies combine documentary, experimental, and sometimes fictional techniques to chronicle a paradigmatic day in the life of a given urban environment and its citizenry by concatenating spatially diverse, thematically related phenomena. Produced, distributed, and exhibited outside the commercial system, the New York city symphonies are nevertheless paradigmatic of the nonsynchronous spaces and layered temporalities that characterize late modernity. More important, as late modernist works, they critique this social order and the spaces that constitute it.

City symphony films have often been studied as a crucial instance of the intersection of cinema and the urban environment. Previous work in film studies has used the films to argue for the mutual constitution of city and cinema on the grounds that urban modernity is primarily a mode of vision. This dissertation rejects that tradition on the grounds that it reduces space to a concept and cinema to the depiction of a pre-extant built reality. By contrast, this dissertation demonstrates that a city symphony is not a way of seeing but is rather a method for negotiating space – a spatial practice. Through extensive close readings of the films in close conversation with both Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space and models of narrative’s spatial characteristics, this dissertation concludes that the New York city symphonies comprise a particular practice in which space can be inhabited and abstracted simultaneously, in which experience and language, place and story, are one in the same. That is, the films challenge modernity’s dominant relation of production, in which space as a mental thing displaces space as it is lived and perceived. This relation largely depends on space being reduced to a series of
metaphors and metonymies – to narrative. Modernity, Lefebvre argues, is constituted by such abstract space.

Abstract space is reproduced through the construction of various narrations of space that naturalize or cover over the displacement of space as it is experienced. This dissertation identifies two such narratives, both of which employ microcosmic logic to produce the city as a unified, perfectly ordered, legible text to be read. Against the microcosmic narration of space, the New York city symphonies produce spaces that narrate. The films challenge the fantasy of “New York City” as a proper name that can refer to a single, knowable entity. Instead, they narrate an asynchronous multitude of sometimes overlapping, sometimes mutually exclusive New Yorks that are inhabited and invented by diverse populations as they perform their daily routines. They do this by narrating marginal areas as a series of secret passages that relate to the center through the time of the festival, and the center itself as a collective work. That is, the films not only produce space as an experience, but in doing so suggest an alternative concept of space. This dissertation proposes the New York films as a cinematic discourse capable of enunciating the multiple, contradictory meanings of given locations and from them positing an otherwise unfigurable, radically different social order characterized by both the perfect harmony of space as it is lived, perceived, and conceived as well as unlimited freedom. This dissertation claims the New York city symphonies as immanent utopias.

Abstract Approved: ____________________________
Thesis Supervisor

______________________________
Title and Department

_________________________
Date
AN ISLAND OFF THE COAST OF AMERICA: NEW YORK CITY SYMPHONIES AS PRODUCTIONS OF SPACE AND NARRATIVE

by

Erica Hillary Stein

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Film Studies in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

July 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Lauren Rabinovitz
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Erica Hillary Stein

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Film Studies at the July 2011 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

Lauren Rabinovitz, Thesis Supervisor

Rick Altman

Paula Amad

Corey Creekmur

David Wittenberg
To my mother, who drew my first maps of the city;

To my father, who taught me to walk in it;

And in memory of Diana Kirschenbaum, who took me to see the dinosaurs
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. v

INTRODUCTION CINEMA AS SPATIAL PRACTICE ......................................................... 1

Cinema: Depiction or Production of Urban Space? ................................................. 4
Charting the Spaces of the City Symphony .......................................................... 10

CHAPTER I THE CITY SYMPHONY, THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE, AND NARRATIVE EXAGGERATION ......................................................... 18

The Revenge of Empty Space ............................................................................ 21
Abstract Space and the Microcosm ................................................................. 26
The Perfect City Map Is Not the Territory .................................................... 37

CHAPTER II “THE ROAD TO HEAVEN TWISTS”: CONCEPTUAL URBAN PLANNING AND ITS CINEMATIC DISCONTENTS ............. 45

Garden Cities: Organizing the Many in the Small ....................................... 47
An Uninhabitable Eden .................................................................................. 52
The Ungainly Symphony ............................................................................. 55
The Labyrinth’s Silence ............................................................................... 64

CHAPTER III THREADING THE LABYRINTH: PARTIALITY, THE TEXTUAL CITY, AND WEEGEE’S NEW YORK (1948) ..................... 73

New York as Tall Letters ............................................................................. 78
Partiality: Spaces That Narrate ................................................................. 87
Cut-Rate Paradise ...................................................................................... 90
Being Together With Strangers ................................................................. 101

CHAPTER IV PRESS HERE FOR SECRET PASSAGE: ASYNCHRONOUS TIME, MARGINAL SUBJECTIVITY, AND MINATORIAL SPACE ......... 108

The Monster at the End of This City .......................................................... 111
Feast of San Gennaro: A Saint in the City .................................................. 116
In the Street: The Quotidian as Performance ........................................... 120
The Urban Swimming Hole: Under Brooklyn Bridge .................................. 127
On the Bowery: Eddies in the Urban River ............................................... 130
At the Island’s Limits .................................................................................. 137

CHAPTER V “IF THEY EVER FINISH BUILDING IT”: MONUMENTALITY, RHYTHMANALYSIS, AND EXPERIMENTAL SYMPHONIES ......................................................... 143

Rhythmanalysis ......................................................................................... 146
Jazz of Lights: Prophets of Sleaze ............................................................ 149
Wonder Ring: The Urban Carousel ............................................................ 155
N.Y.,N.Y.: The Peace and Giants of Penn Station ..................................... 159
GO!GO!GO!: The Anti-Circle Line Tour .................................................. 165
Lights: Festival as Monument .................................................................. 168
Shirley Clarke’s Subversive Landmarks ....................................................... 170
CHAPTER VI  THE CRISIS-CITY, FALSE NARRATIVE, AND THE COOL WORLD (1964) ..................................................................................................................189

A City in Amber and Darkness ........................................................................ 191
The Cool World: The City Is a Liar ................................................................. 196
New York, I Love You but You’re Bringing Me Down ...............................207

CONCLUSION  THE CITY SIGNS ITS OWN NAME ........................................213

APPENDIX  FIGURES .....................................................................................220

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..............................................................................................233
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

A1. The city looms above the train ................................................................. 221
A2. … And regains its medieval walls ............................................................ 221
A3. The pinwheel of the sun ......................................................................... 222
A4. The modern pinwheel ............................................................................ 222
A5. El Greco, *Panorama and map of Toledo* ............................................... 223
A6. Ebenezer Howard, sample plan of garden city ........................................ 223
A7. First shot of Shirley ................................................................................ 224
A8. First shot of Pittsburgh ........................................................................... 224
A9. First shot of New York ........................................................................... 225
A10. First shot of Greenbelt .......................................................................... 225
A11. “A bright light” beings to shine in “New York Fantasy” ....................... 226
A12. First shot of “Coney Island” .................................................................. 226
A13. Surprised by / performing to the camera ............................................. 227
A14. Helen Levitt, *Untitled* ........................................................................ 227
A15. Masking for Halloween ........................................................................ 228
A16. In the shadow of the El. ........................................................................ 228
A17. Film in the city / the city on the marquee ............................................. 229
A18. The ziggurat .......................................................................................... 229
A19. The ceiling of Penn Station in *N.Y., N.Y.* .......................................... 230
A20. The steel picket fence of abstract space ................................................. 230
A21. View of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in *Skyscraper* .................................. 231
A22. The first shot of *The Cool World* ....................................................... 231
A23. Duke swallowed by the vanishing point in Coney Island .................. 232
A24. … And spit back out in Harlem ............................................................ 232
INTRODUCTION
CINEMA AS SPATIAL PRACTICE

To occupy a space is to wear it. A building, like a dress, is worn, and wears out.

Giuliana Bruno, *Public Intimacy*

As a child, I regularly made Saturday trips from my parents’ house in New Jersey to visit relatives in Brooklyn, Queens, or Staten Island. I cannot remember anything about the areas we visited, or how we got there, or what we did. These excursions have all blended into a sullen impression of musty living rooms. From my rarer trips to Manhattan (or, as I’ve always known it, “the city”), however, I recall perfectly the dim halls on the fourth floor of the American Museum of Natural History, the dark vault of Grand Central’s Main Concourse ceiling, and the artificial chill of the Vivian Beaumont Theater. In my childhood map of the city and its environs, the outerboroughs are a mass of hard candy and plastic sofa covers, and Manhattan is a fantastic ensemble of dinosaurs, train stations, and stages where I am always looking “up.”

To live with a city is to learn it. So today my map, if more prosaic, is more detailed, full of subway lines, restaurants and bars, parks, offices, streets to be sought out or avoided. As an adult, I have been educated as an urban pedestrian. So I leave it to the tourists to “look up” and instead look ahead, to my left, and to my right, scanning the street, waiting for the light, weaving through traffic, changing my route to get there faster, or avoid being the first one there. Some sites still loom larger than others, out of proportion for any map other than that of my own experience. When I was twenty-one, I charged through the west 4th street subway station in Greenwich Village five times a week, changing from the A, which served the TriBeCa office of the community newspaper where I worked, to the F, which passed through the Lower East Side, where
most of the stories I covered occurred. Similarly, when I think of Midtown I do not envision a compact tangle of skyscrapers and pubic space, but my sister’s inadvisably located apartment in Herald Square or the reflection of Lexington Avenue on the poster of *The Third Man* in my father’s office in the Chrysler Building. The outerboroughs, too, have finally filled up with the railroad apartments of friends in Astoria, Park Slope, Fort Green, and even Flatbush, where my mother’s family once lived, and where – in retrospect – my Saturday sentences were probably served.¹

I am hardly the first film scholar to recount and reflect upon my trips to Manhattan. In 1997, film historian Scott MacDonald opened an essay on “the city as motion picture” by describing his childhood trips to New York City from his home in small-town Pennsylvania:

New York City was for me “The City” and our family trips into New York were the most exciting moments of my life. The drive from Easton across New Jersey on Route 22 was foreplay leading to the sight of Manhattan from the Pulaski Skyway. For me, and for my father, New York City and its industrial surround were a human creation beyond art. … [T]he distant, wavering flames burning off petroleum fumes in Elizabeth were candles lit in honor of America’s postwar industrial boom and the smoke that darkened the sky was incense – even the horrific stockyard smell near Secaucus (if we were entering Manhattan via the Lincoln Tunnel) was humorous: “P.U. Secaucus,” we’d laugh. Of course, the conclusion of our journey, and the greatest product of America’s industrialization, was New York City itself.²

In MacDonald’s account, although his own vision and that of his father is mobile, the landscape is fixed and unchanging, each site becoming a sight with a unified, concrete significance, and New York itself – the “product,” end result, and proof of post-war national economic ascendancy – is simply a conclusion. Still, iconic, and dead, it has no motion of its own. It is a congealed mass without identifiable, independent elements. It is a goal to be not quite reached (the description stops at the Lincoln Tunnel) so that it may continue to be surveyed from an exterior vantage point. It is difficult to imagine, from MacDonald’s description, his family ever doing anything *in* the city; New York exists, only and always, as a thing to be visually mastered.
MacDonald goes on to argue that, just as his childhood memories amount to a kind of “motion picture” of New York informed by movies about New York, the urban environment in general has an important and even privileged connection to cinema, with city symphonies in particular forming a crucial point of inquiry for investigating this connection.³ City symphonies merge documentary, avant-garde, and occasionally fictional techniques to depict a paradigmatic day in the life of a given urban environment. They are cinematic mappings of a cross section of the urban socio-spatial order contained within a dawn-dusk structure.⁴ City symphonies have antecedents among the earliest actualités and continue to be produced today – with recent entries ranging from Jack Cronin’s Detroit-based Invisible City (2006) to Pin Pin Tan’s 2005 and 2008 Singapore films.⁵ However, the term is most often associated with two distinct cycles.⁶ The first cycle contains films made in and about various European capitals, most notably Berlin, Paris, and Moscow, between 1926 and 1930. The second cycle dates from a generation later and is made up of films produced in and about New York City between 1948 and 1964. This dissertation explores these New York city films produced by alternative cinema.

Both MacDonald’s view and my own are rather cinematic. MacDonald’s recalls everything from the first hazy view of the Emerald City in The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939) to the oppressive apparition of the skyline in The Crowd (King Vidor, 1928) to the triumphant backdrop of the overture in Manhattan (Woody Allen, 1979) – not to mention the jagged skyline stenciled onto countless hats, shirts, shot glasses, and the Miramax logo.⁷ Mine conjures up the concatenating montage, editing, and flash-forward / flash-back devices that set the cinema apart as a technology of modernity, and one most suited to an extended encounter with the urban environment – particularly in the form of nonfiction city films or city symphonies. Are the cinemas each view evokes materially different? Do they contain different cities? What does it imply, finally, about the nature of the metropolis and of film to propose “the city as a motion picture”? The difference between MacDonald’s memories and mine – and the cinematic cities that
follow from them – is the difference between urban space as a thing to be viewed and urban space as a work in which one is enmeshed.

Cinema: Depiction or Production of Urban Space?

I argue that the postwar New York city symphonies do not represent space, but rather produce spatial practices.8 In doing so, I reject James Donald’s claim in Imagining the Modern City that “the city is finally a way of seeing.” In Donald’s account, the relationship between city and cinema is a representational matrix in which cinema helps produce the city as an always already mediated “way of seeing,” and the city provides a model for cinema’s mobile, audio-visual perception as well as a whetstone for the development of new technologies that extend and reinscribe such perception.9 Donald’s conclusion encapsulates much of the work done on the urban environment in relation to film over the past twenty years. His work, as well as MacDonald’s and that of other scholars of the cinematic city, attempts to position cinema as immanent to reality by claiming for both it and modernity a primarily visual articulation. In this, of course, they are well supported by canonic accounts of modernity and postmodernity.10 However, I argue that “the city as motion picture” has a different significance.

All sight is secondary to, produced by, and bounded within space. Space as such consists of our daily practices in and of it (the itinerary of TriBeCa to Lower East Side via Greenwich Village); objects that suggest our individual and collective identity with a ritual inflection (the Chrysler Building); the laws, conventions, and economics that establish various locations in relation to each other and as signs of themselves (the center-periphery hierarchy that sent me from New Jersey through Manhattan to Brooklyn and determines which subways stops are local and which express). That is, all space can be characterized as experience/spatial practice, perception/representational space, or conception/representation of space. Thus, at the minimum, just as the city is never merely a way of seeing, cinema does not re-present urban space per se but rather produces space
as a concept, precept, or experience. Moreover, “space” as such is always already the intermingling of myriad representations of space, representational spaces, and spatial practices – including among them the cinema. For Henri Lefebvre, who developed the theory of the production of space, space is reproduced in as much as actions, events, and cultural objects continue a particular relation of production.\textsuperscript{11} For Lefebvre, there is not an ontological distinction between a given order of space being reproduced in a construction site or on a screen. Both, for example, may be representations of space or, depending on the building and film in question, representational spaces. Therefore, to study the city as motion picture is not only to discuss how cinema models the sight of the urban dweller, or to prove the influence of cinematic representations of the city on certain governmental or community planning movements, but also to delineate the ways in which various motion pictures constitute the city in terms of representations of space, representational spaces, or spatial practices.

Most commercial motion pictures produce the city as a representation of space, just as the modern city is itself dominated by this facet. For example, one of the most dominant and important representations of space in the mid-twentieth century produced New York almost exactly as MacDonald’s account does, and was a viewpoint equally crucial to aerial photography, surveyor’s maps, and films like \textit{Naked City} (Jules Dassin, 1948), a noir with city symphony overtones.\textsuperscript{12} This representation of space, according to Edward Dimendberg, is “serial-centripetal.” Like MacDonald’s city-product of the post-war boom, it addresses everyone and no one, and exerts a visual logic that collects and composes the city as a unified mass in which the shape and import of the whole overrides the significance of any particular part.\textsuperscript{13}

I argue that the serial-centripetal late modern representation of space replaced the early modern microcosm, which was crucial to regional planning and urban renewal schemes predicated on closed, limited small cities, as well as on studies of urban dynamics. The microcosm is characterized by a logic in which each part of a structure is
a metonymy for the structure as a whole, and the structure itself is a miniature of the universe or of an historical order. Both the serial-centripetal view and the microcosm emphasize the differences between and the play of signs – which multiply with the uneven development and complex built/visual environment of modernity – creating an illusory sense of distinctions between various surfaces and locations. In doing so, they suppress the fact that the function of each space is in fact indistinguishable, and all contribute to the unified space of global capital. This representation of space is clearly evident in two city symphonies, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1928), and *The City* (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939). This production of space, which Lefebvre calls “abstract space,” not only instantiates alienated relations of production, but also results in a state of affairs wherein space cannot be theorized and experienced at the same time. Abstract space can only be fractured by differential space.

Articulated by Lefebvre to drama and poetry – and, as I propose, film – differential space produces actual distinctions of function between various sites, often by staging a conflict between central and local powers, or by creating a cyclic rather than linear sense of rhythm. By foregrounding spatial practices, differential space can also use them to suggest an alternative representation of space, which is to say relations of production that differ from those composed by abstract space. I argue that, through tactics such as the construction of “secret passages” and rhythmanalysis, the New York city symphonies produce differential space that depends on their intimation of the haptic, of socially inscribed bodies negotiating, imagining, thwarted by, and responding to various trajectories within the built environment.

By studying the New York city symphonies in relationship to and against their European forbearers and commercial contemporaries, this dissertation intervenes in and contributes to the literature comprising “the spatial turn” in film studies. First, it renews and reimagines the work of Henri Lefebvre – the French Marxist theorist of everyday life, space, and the urban ensemble whose arguments have shaped myriad studies of
cinematic space over the past twenty years.\textsuperscript{17} I interpret Lefebvre in two new key ways: first, Lefebvre considers cinema solely as a representation of space, and as a commercial industry and a visual technology.\textsuperscript{18} Although very few film scholars actually address this, they tacitly accept Lefebvre’s definition, and either explicitly define cinema as a representation of space or mount ultimately fruitless searches for moments or objects in which cinema achieves the status of representational space, affirming Lefebvre’s critique.\textsuperscript{19} More than other modes of cinema, the New York city symphonies, independent (and largely non-commercial) films that often draw as much on audio as on visual content, which are variously aligned with the ciné-poetry movement, the abstract expressionist movement in visual art, and the theater of social problems, encompass the qualities Lefebvre ascribes to theater and poetry. I thus draw on Lefebvre’s understanding of the potential of other media – notably poetry, drama, and some forms of architecture – which he regards as representational spaces that retain the possibility of disrupting abstract space and producing differential space.

Second, I embrace Giuliana Bruno’s understanding of cinema as haptic space to suggest that cinema composes spatial practices. For Bruno, film “is the trajectory drawn by a dweller of a city, who projects herself onto the cityscape. The relation between film and the architectural ensemble involves an embodiment, for it is based on the inscription of an observer in the field, a body making journeys in space.”\textsuperscript{20} Bruno includes here both the itineraries undertaken by audiences entering the theater and the itineraries constructed by editing and mise-en-scène within the body of the film. This dissertation similarly considers both sets of itineraries – although it focuses primarily on the spaces of the films themselves instead of the films in space. My purpose is to uncover the spatial practices of the city symphonies, the kind of observer-inhabitant they inscribe, the experience of space they produce, and the concept of space this experience narrates.

In doing so, I explore further an aspect of Lefebvre’s work largely absent from film studies. Cinema scholars who apply Lefebvre generally position representations of
space – and conceptual space generally – as “bad objects” without attending to the historiographic specificity that prompts Lefebvre to describe them as such. Representations of space and conceptual space are not “bad” or alienating in and of themselves; they are embedded in and help constitute every society. They take on a nefarious power in modernity only because they exert a hegemonic force on representational spaces and spatial practices, engendering a state of affairs in which mental space dominates social and physical space and in which space as a concept precludes experiences of space. Individual films can either reinscribe or challenge this state of affairs, acting as representations of space or as spatial practices. I argue that films function as spatial practices to the extent that they produce space as experiential. Films function as differential space to the extent that they articulate the experiential to a radically different concept of space than the one that organizes the current relations of production.

The New York city symphonies both produce space itself as an experience and use that experience to narrate an alternative concept of space, producing differential space. In doing so, they resolve one of the most fixed oppositions in film studies and critical theory – that between narrative and space. This opposition is perhaps most famously encapsulated by Michel de Certeau’s two views of Manhattan. One, originating from the observation deck of the World Trade Center, reduces the city to a “frozen sea” of the signs of capital; it produces the city as a text to be read. The other, composed by a pedestrian moving through the streets at the buildings’ feet, reduces language to its phatic category until communication becomes solely gestural. The division between space and narrative, as embedded in de Certeau’s example, is not natural but rather historically determined, a result of the estrangement between conceptual space and experiential space. I argue that the New York city symphonies produce a state of affairs in which itineraries are identical to events, and in which the traversal of space is tantamount to narration. As travelogues, or stories in which event becomes location and location event,
city symphonies are uniquely positioned to realize the radical capacity of experiential space to narrate differently, and therefore to suggest an alternative conception of space.

In positioning these largely nonfictional, spatially oriented films as narratives, I expand upon the work of two literary theorists, Louis Marin and Susan Stewart, who study utopias and exaggerations respectively. Both Marin and Stewart investigate objects and tales wherein particular narratives give rise to specific spaces, and vice versa. They probe the process by which narrative and space pass through each other and, in doing so, reveal the underpinnings of extant social orders. I draw on their ideas to develop my concept of the partial, which I define as a structure that, rather than offering narrative and the dominant production of space the alibi of wholeness and perfection on which they depend, stages the imperfection and mutual dependency of each. I use the partial to specify the ways in which the particular serial-centripetal abstract space of late modernity is fractured by the New York city symphonies, which produce cities that profess their incompleteness. In these films, which disarticulate the masterful mix of experimental and documentary tactics and materials their predecessors assembled, the city consistently escapes complete visualization and rationality. It registers instead as a subjective, distorted experience of a center that lacks individuated human figures or a detailed, objective examination of a marginal space that is explicable only in relation to an urban center that cannot be depicted.

The New York city symphonies consistently mark the city they represent as partial, grotesque facets that cannot stand for the whole and which also suggest that any sense of the city as a whole is itself an impossible, inaccurate illusion. Each New York city symphony builds a new city through cinematography and editing, creating itineraries that variously produce Times Square as the haunt of a new St. Francis, the bridges that border the island as carousels, or the skyscrapers clustered at its center as an amusement park. The films challenge the fantasy of “New York City” as a proper name and stable concept that can refer to a single, knowable entity by producing instead an asynchronous
multitude of sometimes overlapping, sometimes mutually exclusive New Yorks that are inhabited and invented by diverse populations as they perform their daily routines.

City symphonies may be an obvious zero degree of the city-cinema connection. But perhaps because of the very transparency of the connection, they have largely been discussed as manifestations of larger aesthetic movements (such as New Objectivity) or as attempts to celebrate and/or obscure a pre-extant built environment and the power relations it contains. While other film forms or genres that directly engage the city – such as film noir, the gangster film, the romantic comedy, and the international art film – have been skillfully and thoroughly investigated as productions of space, city symphonies have curiously been relegated to the status of mere depictions or evocations of space in film studies. This dissertation analyzes the New York city symphonies as productions of differential space and suggests a new model of the cinema-city relation along the axis of spatial practices. Finally, as a temporal mediation between the American culture and urbanism of the 1920s–1930s and the simulacra-saturated, dispersed society of the late 1960s, the period of late modernity from the 1940s to the early 1960s is structured by a particularly complex and layered spatio-temporal order in which the relations of production, the built environment, and the representations they engender, are transformed. New York – its wartime and postwar organization, its urban evolution, and the city films that limn, critique, and counter this socio-spatial order – are an iconic shorthand for this period in American urban history.

Charting the Spaces of the City Symphony

The first chapter reviews the extant literature on city symphonies as it addresses the paradigmatic text *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. I demonstrate that the film’s critical tradition comprises attempts to support or refute John Grierson’s claim that city symphonies are dangerous, apolitical celebrations of technological modernity and the city as a machine without a social context or past. By contrast, I draw on Lefebvre’s historiography of space to
elucidate the ways in which Berlin acts as a resurrection of a pre-modern spatial order known as the supercode in which space as practice, perception, and concept remain integrated and mutually constitutive. At the same time, Louis Marin’s discussion of the unique narrative properties of the travelogue and Giluiana Bruno’s genre-based taxonomy of cinematic itineraries and spatial trajectories inform my interpretation of Berlin as a travel narrative, structured by the microcosm. In Berlin, modernity exists not as a rupture of earlier spatial and social codes but rather as a continuation of them.

Chapter two addresses the difficulties of adapting the city-as-microcosm model to a late modern American context through a discussion of The City. I refute the consensus that The City – and other expository documentaries about space-specific social problems with which it is often associated – represents a radical rejection of the facile urban celebrations hosted by European city symphonies. I argue instead that the urban planning form The City purports to celebrate – the garden city – is, like Berlin itself, an attempt to deny modernity and the ascent of abstract space by retreating to / resuscitating a pre-modern organization of space. Like Berlin, The City depends on the metonymic logic of the microcosm and, like Berlin, it attempts to produce the city as a concept viewed from the outside rather than an experience composed from the inside. However, The City attempts to construct a microcosm even more capacious than that of Berlin, utilizing Lewis Mumford’s exceptionalist model of America’s “usable past” to construct a national symphony in which each historical period is articulated to a time of day. But The City must then perforce include a contemporary location that represents the nascent epoch of late modernity, and which therefore stands for itself, disrupting the film’s structure. I chronicle the ways in which The City’s “modern” section about New York uses editing and cinematography that differ radically from the remainder of the film, producing the spatial narrative of the gigantic, which describes space as an experience rather than a concept.

Chapter three identifies and describes the key feature of abstract space in the late modern American city, that of serial-centripetal.
logic is not dependent on proportionality or transparency, but instead incorporates random chance and anonymous repetition while constructing a unified image of the city in which the shape of the whole is more important and exists independently from its parts. Serial-centripetal logic constitutes the city as a text to be read. Focusing on Edward Dimendberg’s analysis of early post-war noirs, I trace the contours and workings of serial-centripetal logic in *Naked City*, a noir that draws on the structure of the city symphony. I here propose that the particular differential space capable of fracturing serial-centripetal abstract space is structured by partiality. I further develop the concept of partiality through a discussion of *Weegee’s New York* (Arthur Felig and Amos Vogel, 1948), the first of the New York city symphonies. I demonstrate that *Weegee’s New York*, comprised of one segment dedicated to a visually distorted overview of Manhattan and another dedicated to the documentation of a day at Coney Island, détournes the usual function and conceptualization of various locations crucial to serial-centripetal logic and produces experiential spaces that suggest possible alternative social relations.

*Weegee’s* two disparate subjects, forms, and partial structure are adopted by the diverse texts that make up the New York city symphony cycle. Chapters four and five elucidate this model by examining a large number of the New York films. Chapter four deals with the symphonies of the margins, single-location symphonies like James Agee and Helen Levitt’s *In the Street* (1948) that borrow from the documentary tradition to chronicle the activities of marginal populations in peripheral areas. I draw on Chris Jenks’ concept of minitorial space and the history of New York urban planning in the post-war era to argue that serial-centripetal logic produced marginal areas as deadly labyrinths, literally hiding them from view and appropriating them as symbols of unintelligible difference and un-narratable space always lagging behind or lurking underneath modernity. I argue that the symphonies of the margins were able to narrate these apparent spaces of difference as differential space, suggesting that they relate to the center as a series of “secret passages” composed by the time of the festival.
Chapter five discusses the symphonies of the center, which utilize the partial structure of rhythm analysis to narrate spaces of consumption as spaces of leisure, spectacle as introspection, and frame the city center and the cinema as mutually constitutive monument-oeuvre. Experimental city symphonies such as Francis Thompson’s *N.Y., N.Y.* (1957) stage the interplay of rhythms human and architectural, narrating experiential spaces in which architecture is constituted as much by what it witnesses as the specifications to which it is built, and where architecture produces characteristic bodies that themselves are reproduced within the bodies of its users. The experimental city symphonies collectively produce the urban center as a cinematic monument, re-articulating spatial practices to representational spaces and representations of space. The chapter closes by delineating the historical specificity of the New York city symphony cycle, whose films are produced by and responsive to a particular arrangement of production, distribution, and exhibition contexts that dissipate around the same time as serial-centripetal logic gives way to that of the crisis-city and late modernity is succeeded by postmodernity.

Chapter six briefly reviews the critical tradition regarding the alteration in the dominant mode of production and the concomitant spatial relations that is the “power shift” from New York to Los Angeles. I argue that as a result New York becomes a kind of petrified city that consistently “stands for” the spatial relations of production constitutive of late modernity and the lynchpin of a simultaneous nostalgia for modernity. Postmodern New York is abandoned to an unsalvageable crisis-city that can no longer be imaged, read, or conceptually mastered. Against this manifestation of abstract space, structures of partiality like the secret passage and rhythm analysis are not effective. Thus, this chapter concludes a discussion of the New York city symphony cycle by turning to Shirley Clarke’s *The Cool World* (1964) and its use of falsifying narration to suggest how a city symphony may yet produce differential space from the crisis-city.

Through the lens of the New York city symphonies, I engage theories of film as an architecture that links the subject and the world with models of everyday negotiations of
urban space as a series of practices and stories. This approach synthesizes film studies’ redefinition of the medium as one that depends on a walker as much as an immobile viewer and urban studies’ understanding of space as something that narrates instead of merely the material on which narratives are built. “An Island Off the Coast of America” reimagines the relationship between space and narrative in cinema as an argument for the mutually constitutive relation of representation and lived reality and as a search for a city and a cinema in which we can live.
Notes

1 Even those seemingly immobile, eternal monuments that dominated my childhood map have shifted, subtly, within themselves: the Museum’s top floor has been renovated, and Grand Central’s ceiling cleaned until what were once scattered stars in an evening sky have revealed themselves as constellations against an aquamarine background.


3 ibid, 111-13.


5 Invisible Cities, Vimeo, directed by Jack Cronin (Detroit, MI, 2006); Singapore GaGa, DVD, directed by Pin Pin Tan (2005; Singapore: Objectif Films, 2009); Invisible City, DVD, directed by Pin Pin Tan (2008; Singapore: Objectif Films, 2009). This dissertation draws on many films that have never been released commercially or only circulate, in very limited fashion, as 16mm reels. In the case of Cronin’s work, the film has been shown by its director at museums, but is most widely viewed on the free streaming site Vimeo. Thus, I list only the locus of production in the citation. For other films I use the appropriate archive where one would find the distributor location in the citation of a commercial release, and list only the year of production.

6 Keith Beattie refers to films from both of these cycles as “European City Symphonies” or “New York City Symphonies,” in comparison to the later world cinema in which he is most interested (which he calls “Global City Films”) as well as to earlier texts not associated with either cycle, which he calls “city films.” Keith Beattie, Documentary Display: Re-Viewing Nonfiction Film and Video (London: Wallflower Press, 2008).

7 The Wizard of Oz, DVD, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Culver City, CA: Warner Home Video, 2009); The Crowd, DVD, King Vidor (1928; Hong Kong: Bo Ying, 2007); Manhattan, DVD, directed by Woody Allen (1979; Culver City, CA: MGM Video, 2000).

8 Throughout the dissertation, I refer to the films as “the New York city symphonies.” I do this for two reasons. First, the use of the lower case marks the shift from the city to its symphonies. Second, and more important, the lower case “c” gestures to the films’ refusal to gather and resolve the myriad experiences of urban space under
the unified sign of the city as a proper name. The New York city symphonies will never produce a singular “New York City.”


12 *Naked City*, DVD, directed by Jules Dassin (1948; New York: Criterion Collection, 2003).


14 *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, DVD, directed by Walter Ruttmann (1939; New York: Kino Video, 1999); *The City*, DVD, directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke (1939; New York: Naxos, 2000).

15 Lefebvre, 35, 381.

16 For an overview of “the spatial turn” as an important movement / critical moment within diverse humanities and social science fields dating from the late 1980s, see Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1994).

17 Most notably the film scholarship of Giuliana Bruno, Edward Dimendberg, James Donald, and Sabine Hake.

18 Lefebvre, 96-98.


23 See Dimendberg, 122. See also Mark Shiel’s work on American cinema in the 1960s, particularly “A Nostalgia for Modernity,” in Screening the City, ed. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (London: Verso, 2003), 160-80.

24 This is a contrast originally made by Grierson, 103-09.

25 Weegee’s New York, 16mm, directed by Weegee (Arthur Felig) and Amos Vogel (1948; New York: International Center for Photography, 1997).

26 In the Street, VHS, directed by Helen Levitt, James Agee, and Janet Loeb (1948; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991).


28 N.Y., N.Y., 16mm, dir. Francis Thompson (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1957).

CHAPTER I
THE CITY SYMPHONY, THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE, AND NARRATIVE EXAGGERATION

…. By uses of tempo and rhythm, and by the large-scale integration of single effects, [city symphonies] capture the eye and impress the mind in the same way a military parade might do. But by their concentration on mass and movement, they tend to avoid the larger creative job. What more attractive (for a man of visual taste) than to swing wheels and pistons about in ding-dong description of a machine, when he has little to say about the man who tends it? And what more comfortable if, in one’s heart, there is avoidance of the issue of underpaid labor and meaningless production? For this reason I hold the symphony tradition of cinema for a danger and Berlin for the most dangerous of all film models to follow.

John Grierson, Grierson on Documentary

The modern cities emerging from the 1920s symphony films that so fascinated and frightened John Grierson resemble living clockwork. This original cycle of city symphonies deploys both the fluid, rapid montage characteristic of avant-garde and popular films of the late silent period as well as the classical unities of time, place, and theme – to depict a typical day in the life of a real or constructed European capital. Although the cycle consists of roughly six films, Walter Ruttmann’s 1928 Berlin: Symphony of a Great City, is the paradigmatic text.1 As Grierson suggests, Berlin’s symphonic qualities – and, he intimates, those of the “symphony tradition of cinema” as a whole – entail the development of evolving themes and apparently divergent rhythms. These are collected and resolved through the creation of a master structure, which is itself derived from the impression of simultaneous, thematically connected phenomena occurring in different locations, resulting in a sense of omnipresence for the viewer.2 But even as this concatenation of daily activities produces the city as a transparent, unified organism with a circadian cycle –constructing it as a subject, as Grierson notes when he speaks of quotidian activities as undertaken by the city itself instead of by its inhabitants
– it simultaneously reduces the citizenry to part of the rhythmic machine the city comes to resemble. Thus the legibility lent to the usually overwhelming onslaught of technology, industry, and spectacle that compose the quotidian reality of the modern urban dweller also produces a corresponding erasure of the socio-economic and historical underpinnings of these effects.

Grierson’s definition and analysis of the city symphony as a form – most notably the political implications of that form – have become a definitive, nearly unchallenged point of departure for later scholarship on the subject. In his exhaustive review of the extant literature on city symphonies, Keith Beattie traces a clear line of succession from Grierson’s dismissal of Berlin as a mechanical march to Siegfried Kracauer’s critique of the film as an example of the “mass ornament.” Furthermore, Beattie notes that more recent accounts addressing other aspects of the film – such as Anke Gleber’s argument that the film performs a critique of commodity fetishism and its ties to the commodification of gender performance – are constrained in their scope because they consistently accept and depart from Grierson’s conclusions about the underlying effect of a city symphony. Beattie concludes that the end result is neglect of later symphony films in favor of the original cycle.

Beattie attempts to correct this trend by focusing on city symphonies’ consistent display of the corporeal, tracking its incarnation across three distinct cycles: the original European City Symphony films (1926-1930), the New York city symphonies (1948-1964), and the Global City films (1976-1996). Beattie claims that what begins as the display and critique of the gendering of commodity culture in Berlin eventually evolves into the re-appropriation of urban rhythm as bodily rhythm and performance in the New York films. In this he follows both feminist uptakes of Berlin and the best-known discussion of New York city symphonies, begun by American independent film scholar Scott MacDonald. Beattie, however, recuperates the films’ more experimental aspects from MacDonald’s dismissal, and he demonstrates how the form’s reinvention in the
service of anti-colonial goals contests neo-imperialist representations of the developing world.  

It remains more important to consider, however, both the grounds on which Grierson makes his attack and the tacit assumptions made by those who follow him – including Beattie. I argue that this tradition is insufficient to discussions of the object of the city symphony as such because it understands the city symphony as a depiction of a space instead of as a production of space. That is, accounts of city symphonies proceed from the understanding that some real space in the world exists in a certain state, and is filmed. The film then conceals or reveals, emphasizes or de-emphazizes, certain qualities of that space. These are the implicit grounds on which Grierson’s critique of Berlin is made: the real, fleshy city of Berlin consists of built structures, an infrastructure, people, modes of transport, means of production, and the economic relations that exist among them. Berlin, by foregrounding machines, by characterizing citizens as though they themselves were also machines, and by eliding the relations that engender the city’s economic structure, becomes an inaccurate representation of that city. Beattie, expanding upon the foundation laid by MacDonald, uses Grierson’s taxonomy and criticism of the original city symphony cycle to track conventions of urban representation across multiple city films produced throughout the twentieth century, charting what he considers to be major shifts in formal technique, favored material, and political function. Critics like Beattie and MacDonald construct a progressive history of the form in which they delineate its increasing democratization in terms of the films’ reclamation of the corporeal for anti-colonial purposes and manufacture of the crowd as participatory citizenry, respectively.

Grierson’s critique, however, makes “the city” itself innocent, removes it from analysis and constructs it as a kind of blank container that exists prior to perception, conception or experience of it; it surrounds, but has no bearing on, the objects and relations that exist within it. Following Grierson, sometimes despite explicit intentions to
the contrary, critics from Siegfried Kracauer to Carsten Strathausen, and Scott MacDonald to Sabine Hake, consistently construct a model in which the films play no part in the constitution of the city as a space and in which the city as a lived, perceived, and conceived space is not subject to production in the first place.\footnote{11}

Their model of the city symphony as urban representation is flawed. In this chapter, I argue instead that the films may act as representations of space, representational spaces, or spatial practices, and demonstrate that Berlin, unlike its New York descendants, is a representation of space. I do not merely identify a difference or transformation between the European city symphonies of the 1920s and their mid-century American counterparts, but rather understand the two cycles as productive of opposed spaces. While the former reproduces the abstract space that is mutually constitutive with modernity, the later produces differential space capable of rupturing this alignment. Apprehending the city symphony as a production of space reveals that the distinctions noted by Beattie and MacDonald between the original cycle and later instances of the form are indeed extant but are not due to the disjuncture between representation and subject in the original cycle being repaired by later films. The particular space produced by the mid-century films is indebted to their status as narratives of partiality.

The Revenge of Empty Space

In his book *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that “space” as a key metric and object of analysis has been gradually replaced by time. The result is that Hegelian-based theories and critiques, from classic Marxist works to more contemporary deconstructionist accounts, engage social structures as economic and affective relationships without theorizing the space that produces these structures as relational. The disembodiment of philosophy, from René Descartes’s cogito to Michel Foucault’s discourse, results in space’s reduction to a mental thing. This reduction is itself both symptomatic and constitutive of a core characteristic of mature capitalism and modernity:
“the mental realm comes to envelop the social and physical ones.” Contrary to this distortion, space is not only conceived, it also perceived and lived.

Lefebvre argues that each society produces its own space – and, that indeed, human development as both ontogeny and phylogeny is predicated on this production. The subject does not exist without first existing in physical space, which it appropriates by its sensorial apprehension of its surroundings and its separation from them. This parallels the way in which the earliest people constituted themselves as communities by the invention of territory, the lending of difference and therefore significance to that river or this rock. This initial production of space in its absolute form results in the establishment of space as both a mental and social sphere in addition to the physical. As a society develops, the daily itineraries of its inhabitants, as well as the economic and social conditions that help determine those itineraries, become spatial practices. A representation of space is “tied to the relations of production and to the order those relations impose” and is primarily conceived and applied as a mental thing by planners or urbanists, instead of perceived or lived. Representational space is associated with perceived and lived space and is overlaid as symbols on physical space. Between them, representations of space and representational spaces delimit and determine spatial practices and social space. Each social ordering, from the earliest settled societies to the postmodern era, has been produced by the interrelations of this triad. The specific hierarchy or hegemony that obtains among the three, however, varies drastically from society to society and from era to era. In some cases, as with the town-countryside relation and painting in perspective during the Renaissance, representations of space and representational spaces are mutually constitutive. At other moments, when the representation of space (concept) has come to occupy a hegemonic relation to representational space (perception) and spatial practices (experience), resistance can arise from a representational space or spatial practice that challenges that representation of
space. Depending on its historical context and political valence, Lefebvre suggests that art can function as either a representation of space or as a representational space.\textsuperscript{14}

Lefebvre argues that, from the advent of the industrial revolution to the present day, our society has produced and been defined by what he calls abstract space, a state where logical space has displaced social and physical space and conceptual space has displaced perceived and lived space. Within modernity, abstract space also dominates absolute space. Absolute space begins as the hole or gap – literal or figurative – at the center of every settlement and reproduces itself as religious, political and artistic spaces that orient and organize spatial practices. By contrast, abstract space in modernity reproduces itself in part by absenting space as a term subject to critique: by understanding city symphonies as separate from space and space itself as an uncoded container, film studies accounts of the form are complicit in the perpetuation of abstract space.

The case of the 1920s films is a particularly pronounced example: scholars are ever at pains to diagnose the films as suffering from the rupture of representation and subject. In fact, \textit{Berlin} and its contemporaries are typical of the induced unity characteristic of abstract space. As a representation of space, \textit{Berlin} is exactly congruent with and is an instance of the reproduction of the dominant representations of space that construct modernity as abstract space. Later films function as representational spaces or spatial practices that, through their display of contradictions, overlaps and gaps within this dominant representation of space, produce differential space. It is crucial to note that, while Lefebvre has been condemned for an uncritical “celebration of the margins” in which any space associated with or re-appropriated by a subculture or oppressed group is automatically engendered with the potential for widespread change (or at least effective détournement), differential space is not co-terminus with such spaces of difference.\textsuperscript{15}

Differential space is first of all representational space, which can include both architectural structures such as Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia, as well as the space of drama, poetry, and film.\textsuperscript{16} Differential space is predicated on the pluralism that arises from
repetitive practices, differing definitions and interests – such as conflicts between local and central powers – is not systematized, and may contain multiple logics or rhythms, such as the linear and the circular. In fragmenting the induced unity of abstract space, it lends unity to that which abstract space fragments: space in its logical, social, and physical forms, space as it is conceived, perceived, and experienced.

The extant literature on city symphonies makes it possible to understand the original cycle as deeply implicated in the production of modern urban space, particularly in the specific representations of space and representational spaces that rendered that space abstract. This is evident in the cultural matrix of which the city symphonies are a part. As complements to the travelogue and ethnographic documentary film that formed a key strand of documentary practice in the 1920s, they helped stabilize the re-imagination of the home/away, metropole/colonial relationship as that of the new global space, divided into spaces of consumption and spaces to be consumed.\(^{17}\) As filmic renderings and constructions of the subjectivity required to parse the speed, sensory overload, and boredom typical of the modern urban dweller’s environment, they reified the induced differences of form and façade that persisted within the spatial unity and reduction of difference productive of the city as abstraction.\(^{18}\) Finally, as inheritors and continuations of the nineteenth century city novel, panoramic view, feuilleton, and actualités of the turn of the century, city symphonies participated in the tradition of visual and literary production that presented the urban environment as something that could be apprehended and mastered as a concatenated assemblage of place, time, and activity.\(^{19}\)

Lefebvre has relatively little to say about narrative itself as such, although he does extensively discuss metaphor and metonymy, which are held by a wide variety of narratologists, following Roman Jakobson, to be the basic units of all story.\(^{20}\) Lefebvre points to metaphor and metonymy as the basis of both language and space, and the point at which they converge. This implies that both, given their ritual organization and mapping (figuration) of the world, have a narrative dimension.\(^{21}\) Several of the most
notable applications of Lefebvre within film studies – namely the work of Edward Dimendberg and Giuliana Bruno – have consistently described the spaces constructed by both narrative and non-narrative films as narrated. They do this, however, without providing a conceptualization of what it means to understand the filmic creation and negotiation of spatial itineraries as narrative. Both are indebted to the discussion of walking as speech act provided by Michel de Certeau in *Practice of Everyday Life*, but this tends to have the effect of collapsing speech and language, whereas de Certeau is insistent on walking serving as a phatic, uncoded, and un-narratable act. Bruno, however, does provide a key – from the opposite side of the question – in her discussion of Elvira Notari’s Neapolitan city films: “If filmic narratives construct geographies, types of narrative offer topoi and models of spatiality, and genres organize diverse spatial itineraries.” While the melodramas with which Bruno is concerned construct a model of spatiality where the confluence of public and private is mapped onto women’s bodies and their specific presence on the natural stage of the ground-floor living room, both Grierson and MacDonald claim that city symphonies are travelogues. In this particular genre, geography and narrative become one and “the landscape itself is the motivating force.”

As a travelogue, a city symphony ties together places that, as a circuit, constitute the narration. Its events are places that appear only because they are steps in an itinerary. The world is its absolute referent. Travel narratives change a map into discourse and, in doing so, figure that which is already a figure and model of the world. As such, they are narrative objects. In the case of the original city symphonies, they figure a world that is the pinnacle of perfection, a unified whole composed of perfectly proportionate parts. The New York city symphonies, by contrast, produce a world that is unfigurable as a totality and narratable only as a non-metonymic part. Describing the spatially productive activities of the city symphonies as narrative reveals them as exaggerated narrative objects, as defined by Susan Stewart. Stewart claims that, because language is distinct
from experience, just as all narrative is distanced from its objects, a given society collects and proliferates certain formal narrative exaggerations – notably the miniature and the gigantic – in an effort to establish certain other relations of language and experience (and by extension, certain bodies physical and political) as normal. Each of these exaggerations exists as an object and a narrative. Where the New York films deploy the partial views typical of the gigantic to fragment abstract space, producing differential spaces, Berlin reproduces abstract space while lending it an alibi. Berlin deploys the proportionate logic of the microcosmic miniature to construct a travel narrative that is apparently about modernity but is actually composed of a spatial order destroyed by modernity: that of the Renaissance supercode.

Abstract Space and the Microcosm

Understanding the degree to which New York city symphonies function as spatial refutations of the 1920s European films as opposed to the revisions of urban representational practice they are usually held to be requires a revaluation of the original Grierson-Kracauer attack on Berlin in light of the spatial model I propose. First, Grierson’s recounting of the ways in which Berlin and other 1920s European city symphony films misrepresent and obscure the social conditions and relations of production that define modernity is nearly identical to the description Lefebvre gives of abstract space:

> It was during this time that productive activity (labor) became no longer one with the processes of reproduction that perpetuated social life; but, in becoming independent of that process, labor fell prey to abstraction [in the form of] abstract social labor and abstract space. … Abstract space functions “objectally,” as a set of things/signs and their formal relationships, … formal and quantitative, it erases distinctions …

This state was possible and endures because contemporary Western society has access only to a scientific description of space that reduces all experience to the level of language, forbidding an actual knowledge of space and therefore the kind of integrated
spatial practice available to earlier societies. Knowledge of space can only be derived from the production of a spatial code. A spatial code governs the relationships between subjects and their surroundings. Developing its origins in the ancient Greek and Roman world, a supercode that gave rise to a knowledge of space and a unified spatial practice existed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in western Europe. This “coded language” is based on the relationship between city and countryside and may be seen in both the representation of space that was classical perspective and the representational space of the cathedrals in the center of the town. It was a tongue common to architects and rulers, artists and inhabitants. “What the establishment of this code meant was that the people stopped going from urban messages to the code in order to decipher reality, to decode town and country, and began instead to go from code to messages, so as to produce a discourse and a reality adequate to the code.”

This “supercode,” Lefebvre claims, was destroyed around 1910 by the advent of Consolidated Space. Consolidated Space obtains whenever abstract and mental space exist in a hegemonic relation to absolute and lived space. At the dawn of the twentieth century, it shattered common sense about space in everyday discourse as in logical thought and finally the embodiment of that space in the form of the city. Therefore, later representations of space such as Berlin are first of all the productions of a society without a code. They function as the attempt to propose a new code – as well as a new reality sufficient to that code – and must be analyzed as such. This is where canonic analyses of Berlin fall into error. Kracauer and Grierson, for example, consistently fault the 1920s films for their production of a utopian modernist vision predicated on the image of the city as a transparent, unified, multi-celled, and single-bodied organism with a circadian cycle. But this common understanding of the first cycle of city symphonies as a modernist form is incorrect. Lefebvre makes it possible instead to read these films, produced fifteen to twenty years after the shattering of the supercode, as nostalgic denials of the advent of modernity.
Montage and the classical unities observed by their dawn to dusk organization combine to produce films that protest too much, that insist the supercode is still extant and that citizens can still use their “common sense” about space to read from the code to parse urban messages. The European city symphonies are vestiges of a pre-modern space in which everything has its right place. They disavow the fragmentary nature of modern space even as they sever lived space from mental space.

This claim appears to fly in the face of both nearly a century of criticism and the formal logic and content of the 1920s city symphonies themselves. Ruttmann’s Berlin, for example, focuses on such hallmarks of modernity as trains, automobiles, automated means and modes of production, regimented organization of the circadian cycle, increase of leisure time, and the formation of the masses (and mass culture) out of the crowded cities. The film utilizes overtonal montage to link and relink these objects and activities, drawing comparisons and connections among the subjects and spaces associated with them. But if modernity is understood in Lefebvre’s terms as the dis-integration of representations of space, spatial practice, and representational spaces, the building of structures to convey a sense of weightlessness, and the production of global space, then Berlin actually refuses all traces of modernity. Instead, it obsessively stages the re-integration of spatial practices into the fabric of a social space that has remained undisturbed by the industrial revolution and is thus legible through the supercode: it uses the signifiers of modernity to resuscitate a pre-modern space.

This disjunction between the signifiers of modernity and the space of the supercode is particularly evident in the opening sequence of Act I. Emphasizing its “symphonic” nature, and perhaps explaining why it has become the representative critical example of its cycle, Berlin consists of what title cards identify as an overture and five acts. The overture alludes to the city’s prehistoric origins, while the opening of the first act depicts a pre-dawn entry into the city via rail. The subsequent acts detail a typical morning, noon meal, afternoon, leisure activities, and nightlife, respectively. Grierson
describes the beginning of the first act as “a train swinging through suburban morning into Berlin.” Although Grierson is careful to note elsewhere the montage aesthetic and logic of the film, he gives the impression that the train “swings,” that it moves fluidly from one space (suburb) into another (Berlin) without a cut, as though the two exist in a stable and proximal relation to each other that is faithfully recorded by the film. That is, his description conjures nothing so much as the pre-modern “sub-urbs” relation, where villages and farms are under the city. Such a relationship encapsulates what Lefebvre means by a supercode. As a matter of spatial practice – that which is enacted by daily itineraries – the countryside was under the city’s protection and lay the foundations of the city’s existence through the food supply. This state of affairs was produced by and was productive of both complementary representational spaces, such as the location and orientation of a cathedral determining the arrangement of settlements beneath the city’s walls, and representations of space, specifically that of perspective in painting.

If classical perspective and Euclidian space are hallmarks of the supercode in particular and pre-modern space in general, then Cubism and montage are equally integral aspects of modern abstract space. The city symphonies are inextricably linked to montage editing, as Grierson implies in this chapter’s epigraph. Yet, Grierson demonstrates in his brief description of the film’s opening that, in this instance, an avowedly modernist form – even as it displays a train – in fact serves to produce a vanished, pre-modern space, one “that is neither rural nor urban but the result of a new spatial relation between the two … artists discovered perspective because space in perspective had already been produced in front of them.” Such a vision, shared equally by paintings of the sixteenth century and this film of the twentieth, flies in the face of modern urbanism. The modern “science of space” did away with such perspectival representations of space, preferring instead the Cubist analysis of space that engenders a flurry of signs of difference, which produce nothing but sameness, thus undoing the relation between rural and urban and therefore both spaces themselves. Berlin is at pains
to avoid this homogeneity. Instead, as the train “swings into the city,” the montage editing not only depicts the contemporary, ephemeral informational corridors implied by telegraphs and telephones but also conjures the phantom enclosing, defining, and differentiating walls of the Renaissance city.

What Grierson describes as “suburban morning” is actually a relatively undeveloped, flat, rural landscape. The sequence approximates shot-reverse-shot logic, alternating views from the train and images of the train. When the train is absent from the shot, the image is either of the tracks ahead seen from directly above or of the passing landscape screen right. In reverse shots, the train is seen either from below or screen left. These angles are repeated throughout the approach sequence. The most frequently occurring image is of the landscape screen right. At the start of the segment, this side of the screen is viewed from above and consists of nothing more than marshy fields. Gradually, the corners of buildings begin to intrude into the edges of the shots, which now appear as though taken from the same level as the train window, as if the landscape is rising or the train is sinking. Finally, the city appears, not as a terminus, but as encircling. At the three minute mark, the camera cuts from a medium shot of the tracks to a close-up of the wheels to a medium shot of the outer wall of a factory, which dominates the entire left two-thirds of the screen, and gives the impression that the train is now below the landscape it had been crossing, as though the city walls rise above it [figures A1, A2]. For the remainder of the sequence, this angle and composition is retained for all shots taken from the side of the train, as though it is not entering modern Berlin on a perpendicular from the suburbs, but rather skirting the outer wall of a Renaissance city on a circular approach from the surrounding farming towns that lie below it. Abruptly, the sequence ends with a shot of the train arriving in its station, taken from inside the station and emphasizing its vaulted roof and cathedral-like aspect, so that the phantasmatic exterior of Renaissance Berlin is not confronted and contrasted with a modern exterior, but is rather produced as cocooning a modern interior that retains traces of the past.
In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre notes that such termini replace the function of the old city walls once the industrial revolution pushed the city beyond these limits. Train stations now announce the arrival in and borders of the city as cardinal compass points. Lefebvre’s example may be Paris, but the pattern repeats all over France, each city with its *Gare L’Est, Gare du Nord* and so on.\(^{35}\) To an English-speaking reader, the French term carries with it the suggestion of a “guard” of the East or North. But as my analysis of *Berlin*’s train sequence suggests, the film does not imply the diachronic evolution of walls into stations, but rather produces a space where walls and station exist simultaneously, where the walls enclose and center the station. The film does not produce the train station as an historic space of transient liminality, but rather as a psychic space of centripetal monumentality. That is, it foregrounds the station as a static built structure rather than in terms of its function, defined by the repeated motions of trains. The townsman still moves, as embodied labor, to the city, which remains the center, but he does not go home again – the film ends with fireworks exploding over the city center, not a return trip to the countryside. Berlin and its environs remain in a static, perspectival relationship, mutually constituted by walls that terminate and reinscribe the paths radiating from a central, stable monumental point. The physical human body and its movements double and construct the movements of this self-contained universe.

Throughout the film, editing produces the city as a series of proportionate relations invoking the pre-modern sense of scale in which the city is at the center of some territory and is also the territory’s capital. The city is both involved in a metonymic relation to the universe and is itself composed of a series of metonyms. The object or narrative exaggeration this suggests is, in fact, a well-known artifact of the Renaissance, a type of miniature: the microcosm. Stewart argues that the microcosm is a miniature with roots deep in classical thought, come to fruition in the Renaissance to produce a series of metaphoric equivalences between both “the universe and the abstract qualities of man” and “the physical body of man and the physical features of the universe.”\(^{36}\) Stewart’s
definition of the microcosm has striking similarities to both the criticism heaped upon

*Berlin* by critics such as Kracauer and Grierson and to the primary characteristics of
abstract space:

> Microcosmic thought is a matter of the establishment of correspondences between seemingly disparate phenomena in order to demonstrate the sameness of all phenomena. Such thought therefore always tends toward theology and the promulgation of a “grand design.” In diversity is unity; all phenomena are miniaturizations of the essential features of the universe.\(^{37}\)

In *Berlin*, the simultaneity of spaces produced by intercutting results in the same microcosmic representation of space. Kracauer claims the film expresses this simultaneity only superficially, but it is worth noting the impression and image he argues a successful attempt would produce:

> The solidarity of the universe can be demonstrated ... by creating the impression that [spatially distinct] phenomena offer themselves to view at one and the same moment. [This] stresses their co-existence, represents an instance of “reality of another dimension,” in as much as it amounts to a cinematic interference with conventional time; by dint of sheer editing the spectator is led to witness widely scattered events simultaneously so that he gets the feeling of being omnipresent.\(^{38}\)

“Solidarity of the universe” is precisely the narrative encompassed by the microcosm, and, although the linkages in *Berlin* may be shallow, a sense of spectatorial omniscience is certainly derived.\(^ {39}\) This omniscience is generated in part by the very decorativeness or obvious nature of the editing so derided by Kracauer.

Stewart’s microcosm demonstrates that “in diversity is unity;” it establishes “correspondences between seemingly disparate phenomena in order to demonstrate the sameness of all phenomena.” Kracauer, for example, singles out the laziness of the contrast between the food eaten by the rich and that of the poor in the lunchtime sequence of Act IV.\(^ {40}\) Yet what is at issues in these scenes is not the contrast between rich and poor (or even human and animal) or a ham-handed social critique of it, but rather the synchronicity of their meals and the identity of their activity: everyone eats, every meal shares the same time, but each has its own (appropriate) space. The contrasts of rich and
poor are in and of themselves symmetrical. The rich consume elaborate feasts in opulent mansions while the poor pick over meager portions in cheap boarding houses.

While Kracauer and Grierson condemn the film’s linkages and contrasts for their lack of imagination and insight, what is really at issue are the images’ over-determined status, where each and every aspect of the frame reinscribes and stabilizes the reciprocal identities of space, subject, and product. The lunchtime sequence again employs the metonymic structure of the microcosm to assign a proper name, function, and above all, proportionality, to the city. The type of food stands for the subject’s socio-economic position just as the subject inhabits and thereby names and describes a certain corner of the city. This extends even to the more fanciful images in the sequence, those of the animals in the zoo and on the streets. Each has its proper place – the birds in the trees, the cats in the alleys – and each has its proper food. The appropriative nature of the sequence is particularly evident in the zoo, where each animal and its lunch are framed through the bars of its enclosure. Nowhere in this sequence is the possibility of the frugal financier dining on bread and water in his office or of the taxi driver mustering her savings for an extravagant meal, no more than there is of the lion escaping and eating the hippo. In fact, none of the animals depicted in the act of consuming are themselves consumed elsewhere in the sequence.

The fragmented, contradictory, and frequently illegible nature of space in the modern city is held at bay through the ability of the omniscient spectator to organize and therefore parse Berlin as a series of apparent contrasts slowly revealed as the components of a unified, logical structure. The result is that the very rigidity and artificiality of social and spatial relations within the sequence – however counter they run to the actual post-war confusion of both typical in European centers of the time – is produced as natural. The film amounts to the resuscitation of the supercode, where each “urban message” has its own, predetermined meaning, can be read by means of that code, and therefore as a matter of proportionate relations. Berlin depicts modernity as though it consists of the
same social space as the Renaissance, as though there has been no rupture. This
persistence of an episteme is particularly evident if the film’s diachronic, as well as
synchronic, spaces are examined. These are the very spaces ignored by most accounts of
the film, which persistently proceed as though the train approaching the city was Berlin’s
first image.

In fact, the train does not appear until two minutes have elapsed, although its
appearance does coincide with the intertitle announcing the start of “Act I.” This would
suggest, then, that the prior screen time constitutes an overture. When commentators seek
to establish the innovation of later city symphonies, they often note that their favored film
“does not begin with the conventional establishing or panorama shot, unlike classic city
symphonies such as Ruttmann’s Berlin.”41 This opposition, however, is inaccurate.
Berlin features no such aerial photography, but rather begins with the unreadable image
of water. This first image is utterly illegible inasmuch as it is entirely undifferentiated. It
fills the entire frame as a flat, motionless surface until, from somewhere unseen, the
surface is disturbed and the resulting ripples lend the viewer the ability to discern
contrast, context and meaning: the camera pans up, revealing a distant tree in soft focus.
All at once, the film produces directionality, organized relations of objects and the ability
to name: what was once a plane becomes frontal surface, and then a river with vegetation
at its edge.42 The sequence is a direct visual approximation of the prehistory of space and
language traced by Lefebvre in his imagining of the birth of society, territory, and the
absolute space that founds both of them.43 This image dissolves into abstracted,
alternating lines of black and white that rotate like a pinwheel and then transitions into
medium shots of rapidly passing suns, close ups of spinning clock hands and finally a
hard cut to the train [figure A3]. Shots that indicate and delimit the passage of time
within the day constructed by the film’s editing logic are common in Berlin, which
consistently punctuates act breaks with a shot of a large public clock that indicates the
time.
These shots are generally redundant, as the surrounding content is devoted to chronicling a clearly defined section of the day – for example “daybreak” in section one and “morning” in act two – so that the shot of the clock reading 5 o’clock or 9 o’clock merely confirms the audience’s sense of omniscience and the communicative abilities of montage. But if the characteristic form of time in the city symphonies is synchronic, concatenating apparently diverse spatial practices, then Berlin’s opening sequence produces the linear historical time, the before and after, that always hovers around the edges of social space. In his definition of social space, Lefebvre notes that it is always formed out of natural space and sensory data, first through the practice of marking with un-worked objects such as stones, which instantiate the first representational spaces and thus inaugurate spatial difference and therefore the organization of relations and modifications that constitute social space. In the practical historical context of cities, this process can be seen in the construction of a repeated camp on the bank of a river, lake or other body of water and the gradual development of this into a site and eventually into an urban center in which the water and the city’s relation to it continue to function as both evolving historical representations of space and an ahistorical representational space. It is this process that Berlin’s overture recapitulates, depicting the interdependent production of space and time (which cannot exist without spatial differentiation) from pre-history to the present day. The sequence, however, is most notable for its insistence on reclaiming the sweep of history as an all-encompassing present – in making a day reflect eternity.

Berlin is perhaps the most insistent of all the 1920s films in producing itself as a cinematic symphony. This is particularly evident in the formal congruence of all five of its acts. Instead of building on the rhythms and patterns of preceding sections, each act begins with an unmoving shot of a clock and then gradually films more moving objects more rapidly – increasing the number and pace of hard cuts – to suggest an increase in the amount and pace of sensory data as well as their interrelations, culminating in a flurry
of cuts that integrate each section’s integral object relations at the end of the act. This helps situate the film’s opening moments as a true overture that contains and sets out the important themes of the subsequent composition in the relationship they will enjoy throughout the main body of the proceedings. This is certainly true of the river/pinwheel couple, which reappear at what is arguably the film’s climax and which Beattie argues is its most glaring moment of gender critique: the afternoon suicide of a woman who jumps from a bridge. This moment occurs at the end of the rainstorm Grierson claims is the film’s only “product.” Before the woman is glimpsed, her subjectivity is suggested by a series of canted angles and jerky camera movements that eventually focus on the rotations of a large black and white pinwheel in a shop window [figure A4]. In one of the few dissolves of the film, the next image shows the woman wringing her hands on the steps of the bridge, framed from below in a series of ever more extreme expressionist angles until her actual leap into the river. The editing works to suggest that the pinwheel – with its abstraction of line and frenzy of motion that encompass modernity – is a type of the natural space of the water.

More important, the apparent rupture – or at least change and evolution – the pinwheel suggested in juxtaposition with the primordial river at the film’s opening has been rewritten as an ahistorical, synchronic metaphor. The pinwheel is like the woman’s state of mind, which is reflected back by the disturbed surface of the water that swallows her – the potentially subversive arrhythmia embodied by a misbehaving body and asynchronous mind are surrounded and neutralized by the foregrounding of the symmetrical, natural and eternal equivalences between technology and nature, social space and physical space, prehistory and modernity. The social space that produces, subjectifies, and abjects the woman remains stable and transparent, dangerous only to those who find it illegible or who persist in reading it as indicative or productive of an historical rupture.
This equivalence between prehistory and the present, natural space and mental space, makes it possible to understand what Grierson and Kracauer truly perceived and critiqued when they made despairing note of Berlin’s production of the perfect city. In their reevaluation of the canonic criticism of the film, Graf and Beattie are at pains to note the film’s studied inclusion of imperfection, specifically those forms of class- and gender-based inequality associated with urban modernity.47 What both Grierson and his critics fail to realize, however, is that Berlin’s perfection derives not from its representation or obscuration of the means and modes of production, but rather from its conception of the city as a space. As a production of abstract space, especially in its appropriation of the microcosm as a denial of the ruptured supercode, Berlin is utterly typical in its induction of formal differences and contrasts – such as those of the lunchtime sequence and the suicide segment – as a tactic for displacing produced differences of function associated with both absolute and differential space.48 When Grierson and Kracauer intimate that Berlin is a fanciful utopia, they gesture toward its representation of technology and stimuli as wonderments, but they miss the film’s staging of an actual no-place: the integrated spatial practice, representational space, and representations of space that disappeared with the mass culture, technology, and infrastructure characteristic of the modern life the film only pretends to chronicle.

The Perfect City Map Is Not the Territory

Cut off from its immediate spatial context, mapped in its totality, insistent on proportionality and transcendence, the landlocked city of Berlin is transformed by Berlin into a cinematic island. Stewart herself emphasizes the importance of this figure in her concluding analysis of the miniature by turning to Gulliver’s Travels: “As is the case with all microcosmic models, it is absolutely necessary that Lilliput be an island.”49 Therefore, it is logical that a city symphony of New York, which is after all a series of islands to begin with (excepting The Bronx) and possesses mostly dramatic, inviolate
borders instead of outskirts, would be an intensification of this trend, not a reversal of it. The very means by which Berlin constructs the literally perfect city, however, also admits for the possibility of the disjuncture its structure attempts to forbid. In doing so, the film points to the way in which the New York city symphonies will use very similar techniques and subjects to produce a vastly different space.

As a microcosm, Berlin is part of the tradition of the miniature, in which Stewart claims narrative is downplayed in favor of the tableaux, as the sense of many components in a small figure slows and coalesces narrative into an image. But as the product of a city symphony, this microcosmic image is itself formed by the operations of what critics from Grierson to MacDonald have identified as travel narratives, which systematically oscillate between image and narrative as they create a mobile map. All travel narratives are effectively the drawing of maps and the naturalization of the figure of the world the map implies because they not only take the landscape as a motivating force but also produce location as event and itinerary. As a travel narrative about the supercode constructed with the materials of urban modernity, Berlin is effectively a doubled city map. If a map is the figure of a figuration of the world, and a travel narrative transmutes a map into discourse, then Berlin describes a figure (urban modernity) that is at odds with the specific figuration of the world it narrates (the microcosm).

In Utopics: Spatial Play, Louis Marin argues that such double maps unintentionally and unavoidably imply a neutral space in which their object exists as unfigurable. Marin understands urban maps as representing the production of discourse around the city and claims that they codify and contain historical narratives through the management of discourse and narrative. However, in attempting to reconcile incongruous locations, maps introduce an element of spatial play – which should here be thought of as a kind of slack or give in the perfect, tense composition of a representation of space – which is only exacerbated if the map attempts to reconcile two disparate spatial models. For example, in Marin’s key example of El Greco’s View and Map of Toledo, a panorama
of the city stretches across the canvas, unveiled by angels who hover in the sky at the center, interrupted only by the figure of a man who occupies the extreme lower right corner of the frame. In his hands he holds a geometric map or plan of the city, to which he gestures [figure A5]. The panorama and the map both evoke an omniscient view that originates from outside the location depicted. As Stewart argues, this is the vantage that composes all miniatures, and it is the same one constructed by Berlin’s historical and spatial mastery. However, by insisting that the panorama is the same as the grid – that the view and the plan are one – the painting discloses all the ways in which they are not and reveals the particular representation of space, the microcosm, that insists they are. For example, the panorama implies that it contains the entire city, which is viewed from a (non-existent) cliff opposite it. But if this is the case, where is the man? Does he stand just in front of the viewer, on the same cliff? If so, then surely his map of the city is the panorama, the same as ours, and so why does he hold the plan? If the view is a kind of map, should it not encompass all the city’s inhabitants, including the man? The man and the plan – and, given the microcosmic logic at work, the man is himself yet another map – both fade back into the panorama and restage it. Between the viewer and the man’s beckoning hand, between the blank of the paper bordering the plan and the panorama, the city that has been excluded from both lurks, breathing and waiting. It is the city of experiential space, not conceptual space, composed of representational spaces and spatial practices, not representations of space. It is the city that engulfs and narrates the voyager, not the one studied and narrated by the voyeur.

The doubled map that is Berlin opens such a space, where another Berlin, escaping the admixture of panorama, aerial, and street-level views that fill the screen, waits with all the potential of differential space. If in Berlin differential space exists only offscreen, implied by the simultaneous production and denial of abstract space onscreen, in the New York city symphonies it is co-terminus with and mutually constitutive of the contents of each shot and their interrelation. The two cycles do not, however, stand in
diametric opposition to each other. Rather, their formal similarities and functional differences can only be understood through an intervening text. Premiering in 1939, *The City* occurs exactly at the midpoint between the two cycles. More important, the film produces neither a doubled map nor a city that resists all attempts at mapping. Rather, the differential space produced by *The City* derives from the film’s division against itself, resulting in the construction of two mutually exclusive maps of America, one drawn from outside the city and one from inside it.
Notes

1 Several scholars, most notably James Donald and Siegfried Kracauer, implicitly situate this film as paradigmatic of its cycle by using it as a key case study and then mentioning a few aspects of other films in the cycle as evidentiary support. Donald, 72-75; Siegfried Kracauer, Theory of Film (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 64-65, 81-83. Alexander Graf and John Grierson not only explicitly analyze the film as a “typical” city symphony, both construct it as the form’s apex; Graf in terms of its mastery of montage as visual symphony, and Grierson in terms of its supreme danger. Grierson, 103-08; Alexander Graf, “Berlin-Paris-Moscow: On the Montage Aesthetic in the City Symphony films of the 1920s,” in Avant-Garde Film, ed. Alexander Graf and Dietrich Scheunemann (New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 77-79. Beattie traces this critical tradition from Grierson to the present day, 23-39. Other films in the cycle include Rain, DVD, directed by Joris Ivens (1929; Paris: The European Foundation, 2009); Paris qui dort, DVD, directed by René Clair (1925; New York: Criterion Collection, 2009); Moscow, m4v, directed by Mikhail Kaufman (1927; New York: Red Channels, 2009); Rien que les heures, 16mm, directed by Alberto Cavalcanti (Paris, 1926); Man With a Movie Camera, DVD, directed by Dziga Vertov (1929; New York: Image Entertainment, 2002).

2 Siegfried Kracauer accepts Grierson’s premise, but expands on it to argue that the symphony film’s primary attraction for the viewer is its ability to relate diverse locations, 65.

3 Grierson, 106.

4 Beattie concentrates on and disputes Kracauer’s analysis of the film’s historical context in Weimar cinema and its director’s later contributions to the cinema of the Third Reich in Mass Ornament and Cagliari, respectively. More important, however, is Kracauer’s discussion in Theory of Film precisely because it discusses the film in generic context as an “impressionist documentary” in purely formal terms.


6 Beattie, 4-7.

7 MacDonald’s taxonomy and critique of the city symphony is most fully articulated in Garden in the Machine but first found expression in two articles: “The City As Motion Picture”; and “The City As the Country: New York City Symphonies from Rudy Burckhardt to Spike Lee,” Film Quarterly 51.2 (Winter 1997-1998): 2-20.

8 The films Beattie discusses as global city films range from Santiago Alvarez’s Hanoi Martes Trece (Cuba, 1967) to Zeini Sfeir’s In Spite of the War (Lebanon, 2000).

9 Although I follow the thorough taxonomy and generic evolution traced in Beattie’s account, my intent here is not to contest or expand upon his revisionist history of the city symphony, nor is it to refute Grierson’s attack on “the most dangerous of all film models to follow.”
10 Beattie, 42-54.


12 Lefebvre, 5.

13 Lefebvre’s more abstract and speculative theorization of this pre-history is quite consonant with Edward Soja’s research and model of development from a social definition of territory to a territorial definition of society in his groundbreaking study The Political Organization of Space (Washington D.C.: American Association of Geographers, 1971), which went on to influence later cultural theorists of space from Mike Davis to David Harvey.

14 Lefebvre, 33-38.

15 Kevin Hetherington makes the charge without attending to this distinction in The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering (New York: Routledge, 1997), 8-12.

16 Lefebvre, 232, 392.

17 Grierson, 105-06; MacDonald, 147-52.

18 Alexander Graf, 80-84.

19 Dimendberg, 59-60, 83.

20 The more common formulation is metaphor and synecdoche. Lefebvre, however, borrows his terms from Nietzsche, who explicitly alludes to metaphor and metonymy, 137-40. I follow Lefebvre’s terminology throughout the dissertation.

21 Lefebvre, 132-40.

22 De Certeau, 91-111.


24 Grierson discusses the films as a kind of travelogue of the familiar, in contrast to Flaherty-style investigations of the exotic, 102. MacDonald duplicates this concept almost exactly, with the added caveat that both types of travelogue are produced by empires attempting to survey and stabilize their territory after World War One, Garden, 150-51.


28 ibid, ix-xvi.

29 Lefebvre, 49.

30 ibid, 5.

31 ibid, 47.

32 Grierson, 105.

33 In his discussion of the film, Weihsmann makes the connection explicit and describes the film as adopting the logic of cubism, 21-22.

34 Lefebvre, 38.

35 ibid, 127.

36 Stewart, 129. Stewart’s insistence on “man” instead of “human” is probably meant to emphasize the gendered aspects of the feudal and mercantile social order on which the microcosmic model depended. (Women, being irrationally constructed, were presumably unfit to serve as miniatures of the universe.)

37 ibid, 128.

38 Kracauer, 64.

39 Kracauer objects specifically to the clichéd cutting between commuters boarding a trolley and cattle being driven up the street, 182.

40 ibid, 183.


42 This summary perhaps suggests the opening passages of Genesis, where the uncreated world waits as silent, dark water that, once moved over by god, all at once have a face and then give rise to air, land and life. Lefebvre suggests that creation myths parallel and reproduce the process by which bodily perceptions of the self in natural space eventually give rise to representational spaces that mark, differentiate and thereby produce primordial social space. These foundational representational spaces, once superseded by successive representations of space, are precisely what persist in social space as works of art. *Berlin* is not only an example of the city symphony performing this
kind of function, it also inaugurates a repeated opening motif taken up by multiple later symphonies.

43 Lefebvre, 135-37.

44 ibid, 42-53.

45 Beattie, 42.

46 Grierson, 106.

47 Graf, 85; Beattie, 45.

48 Lefebvre identifies induced formal difference as one of the hallmarks of modernity’s representations of space, 248-50.

49 Stewart, 68.

50 ibid, 48-53.

51 While Grierson supplies this generic affiliation by implication and MacDonald elaborates the model through the comparison to ethnographic film, the clearest analysis of the city symphony as the narration of space and the creation of a map is found in Bruno’s work. Grierson, 103; MacDonald, 150. See especially Bruno, Atlas of Emotion, 1-22.

52 Marin, 203-228.

53 ibid, 228-230.

54 Stewart, 65.
CHAPTER II

“THE ROAD TO HEAVEN TWISTS”: CONCEPTUAL URBAN PLANNING AND ITS CINEMATIC DISCONTENTS

We found ourselves drifting back from the halcyon anemics of the architects to a messier world that pleased us more.

John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*

Eleven years after the premiere of *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, *The City* demonstrated that the exaggeration of the microcosmic miniature was crucial not only to cinematic cities, but also to contemporary urban planning designs like the garden city. Commissioned by The American Institute of Planners through Clarence Stein for the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair, *The City* – directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke with a script by Lewis Mumford and an Aaron Copland score – publicized both the successes of garden cities and popularized the particular understanding of American history that justified their construction.¹ Like *Berlin*, *The City* seeks to escape modernity through the microcosmic logic of the miniature, imposing proportion, order, and legibility on urban space through the construction of an exterior vantage point. It extends the dawn-dusk structure of the European city symphony to encompass the history of the United States. The film does this by using the common trope of a country’s development as a centuries-long “national day.”²

*The City* consists of five discrete sequences, each shot in a different location: Shirley, Massachusetts; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; New York, New York; and Greenbelt, Maryland. The film produces the footage of these contemporary sites as a narrative of the evolution of urban forms. Thus, dawn is a pastoral colonial-era town (Shirley), and disheartening twilight settles in an industrial-age company town (Pittsburgh), before the film culminates in the glorious tomorrow of the garden city (Greenbelt). In this manner,
The City mounts an explicit argument for the garden city as a desirable late modern urban form. The film’s beginning and ending locations are connected through the intervening cities of Pittsburgh and New York, as well as a sequence shot on anonymous highways. As this itinerary suggests, aside from the unthematized move from North (Massachusetts) to South (Maryland), no particular geographic logic justifies the film’s syntax, which is instead structured by an historical itinerary: The City uses the structure of a travelogue to build a time machine.³

The City not only expresses the logic behind the garden city but gives it an American-exceptionalist inflection: the film attempts to explain and to justify the garden city as both the only workable American urban form of the future and as an innate part of the country’s past. Architectural critic and urban historian Lewis Mumford, a founding member of the Association and the scenarist of The City, was the primary importer of the garden city model to America. In the 1920s and 1930s he linked the garden city to his concept of the usable past in books like The Golden Day, Sticks and Stones, and The Story of Utopias.⁴ Mumford argued that all American architecture should be organic not only to its immediate spatial context but also to its historical inheritance as a way of expressing and ensuring America’s ability to gain cultural independence from Europe, develop its own identity, and fulfill its destiny.⁵ Thus, successful social forms from earlier periods could be re-created and adapted to contemporary use, keeping the nation’s cultural heritage and connection with its past intact, excepting America from the “fall” suffered by other dominant societies as they negotiated modernity.⁶ The “usable past,” like a miniature, has a tendency to compose tableaux and complicate or stall a linear sense of time.⁷

Mumford popularized the garden city in order to counter the overwhelming and alienating quality of urban modernity and the technological explosion allegedly celebrated in Berlin. Paradoxically, The City – his cinematic translation of his critique – reproduces abstract space in the exact same ways as Berlin. Both films impose an
anachronistic form that denies modernity while reproducing modernity’s constitutive spatial conditions. Moreover, rather than merely recasting modernity as supercode, *The City* turns the progression of American history itself into a kind of microcosmic tableaux, suspended in a timeless present in an enactment of Mumford’s philosophy of the usable past. Thus, *The City* sets out to compose a microcosm even more capacious than that of *Berlin*, observed from an even more distant and masterful vantage point, arranging a miniature of time as well as space. The sheer capacity and sense of instant legibility composed by a miniature is designed to forbid any apprehension of excess, invisibility, or imperfection. However, the film’s desire to transform history into a miniature results in this exaggeration’s rupture. In order to narrate the predestined apotheosis of the garden city, *The City* must produce three locations filmed in 1939 as a city of 1790 (Shirley), a city of 1880 (Pittsburgh), and a city of the future (Greenbelt). However, for the film’s miniature to be complete and truly comprehensive, it must also take one more present-day location – New York, New York – and characterize it as the present. While the other locations always stand for another time and another place, New York City always stands for itself. Coupled with the narration and cinematography unique to this section, New York emerges not as an event in the (time) travel narrative that leads to Greenbelt but as an alternate ordering of space altogether. Slipping the bonds of the miniature, New York instead narrates the gigantic. The section produces experiential space, which is precisely what eludes the conceptual space the rest of the film constructs.

**Garden Cities: Organizing the Many in the Small**

Reviewing *The City*, documentarian John Grierson confronts this cinematic explanation of the garden city as the fulfillment of comprehensive community planning’s utopian potential. He explains the general form of the garden city by describing a tabletop model he had recently seen during the frustrating process of planning the never-
completed *The World Beyond War*, a film that, like *The City*, was intended to argue for a new form of urban planning:

> It came to a head one day when a fine young bunch of men were showing us an ideal town they had planned. There were all sorts of good things in it. Your little mother did not have to risk her infants across main roads, the shops were just around the corner from the school, the factories were nicely detached, the town was sectioned into groups, and the decorative trees could have bred enough bugs to devastate a district. I was polite, as befitted the occasion. But young John Taylor had had about enough. “Christ,” he said, “don’t you have any fish and chip shops?”

After Taylor’s outburst, Grierson and his team reconsidered their film’s ideological project and abandoned the garden city as the solution. They searched for other ways to improve urban life from within extant communities, “drifting back to a messier world that pleased us more.” In doing so, Grierson hoped to avoid the fate of both *The City* and the architect’s model, which devote all their powers to valorizing the garden city while failing to render its sights appealing. Ten years after denigrating *Berlin* for implicitly producing a shallow, exterior view of the city’s relations of production, Grierson critiqued *The City* for explicitly producing the same vantage point.

*The City* fails, however, for a different reason than does the model. Although both narrate the miniature of the garden city and the conceptual space it produces, only the model succeeds in excising an interior view and experiential space – what Taylor might call fish-and-chip-shop space – entirely. By contrast, *The City* fails to completely remove this kind of space. The film renders its “present day” section with the kind of internal, sensory-based vantage point that characterizes experiential rather than conceptual space and the exaggeration of the gigantic rather than the microcosmic miniature. The miniature depends on an external, masterful vantage point, the gigantic on an internal, incomplete, crane-necked tactility. *The City* uses the former to stage conceptual space and the latter to stage experiential space in the same text. In doing so, *The City* both mounts a critique of the garden city and demonstrates the limits of the conceptual space composed by the miniature in general. The juxtaposition of miniature and gigantic also explains the
curious paradox of the film, which has formed the center of each critique of it since its 1939 release to the present day: if *The City* advocates for the garden city as the path to an American utopia and marshals the whole of the nation’s history in defense of this plan, why has no viewer ever wanted to live in the paradise the film attempts to regain?

When Grierson describes the model garden city, he narrates the miniature of a miniature. In viewing a reduced-scale model of a garden city, in standing outside and above it, Grierson occupies physically the conceptual vantage point from which the full-scale garden city was imagined and which always already composes it as a miniature. This doubling causes the form’s innate microcosmic qualities to come to the fore in Grierson’s description as an overwhelming sense of stillness, tableaux, and proportionate relations.

A garden city or greenbelt town is a utopian urban planning concept developed during the industrial revolution by several British planners and philosophers. It found its most comprehensive expression in 1898 in Sir Ebenezer Howard’s *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. Howard traces London’s urban ills to two primary causes: the unlimited sprawl and population density of traditional cities and the additional health and safety problems created by the mixture of industrial and commercial sites with residential areas. His solution, modeled on the arrangement of the English feudal village, was to halt the geographic and population growth of extant metropoles and, in their place, build a series of communities limited in area by an encircling agricultural belt. Within this belt, population would be permanently capped – the citizens rendered self-sufficient by the array of industry, commerce, leisure, and residential areas provided, neatly isolated each from the other [figure A6]. Garden cities thus collect the industries, practices, and relations constitutive of a national social order, scale them down, and reproduce them across the countryside. After their spread across the entire nation, modern England would consist of multiple miniature reproductions of its past, each part complete in and of itself, thereby testifying to the unity and stability of the whole. Howard would have essentially
recoded the country as a reanimated supercode, in practice reducing Britain entirely to a series of signs.

Howard’s ideas, put into practice in both England and the United States, typify rational-comprehensive planning. The philosophy of rational-comprehensive planning dates from the Enlightenment and may be seen in Baron Haussmann’s re-design of Paris, Pierre L’Enfant’s plan for Washington D.C., and in the Spanish colonial grid towns Lefebvre describes as a machine for capital removal and the naturalization of colonial relations. Rational-comprehensive planning begins with an abstract notion of what a spatialized social order should express and how it should function. From there, the concept is imposed on a space that has either not been previously developed or from which all previous representations of space, representational spaces, and spatial practices have been erased by destroying the built environment and removing the populace. Under the auspices of rational-comprehensive planning, of which utopian urban design in general and garden cities in particular are a paradigmatic type, cities and towns are designed from scratch to satisfy the prescriptions of planning theories in which desired urban behaviors and functions can be induced by the construction of the proper forms. Moreover, even where rational-comprehensive planning was not implemented wholesale, the garden city as ideal came to dominate much of the urban and regional planning theory of the early to mid-twentieth century in both Western Europe and the United States. In America, the Great Depression and the administration of New Deal resettlement programs motivated the building of several garden cities, including Radburn, New Jersey and Greenbelt, Maryland. These projects represent the culmination of years of theorizing, advocacy, and lobbying by several groups, most notably the Regional Planners Association of America. The American Institute of Planners, the sponsor of The City, was a successor to this group and crucial in the planning and execution of the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair, which was dedicated to “the city of the future” and featured several
different conceptions of what that future should be, many of which displayed traits the Association had long favored.

Thus, in Grierson’s account of his team’s interaction with the garden city’s conceptual space, Taylor’s fish and chip shop outburst points to the ways in which experiential space (spatial practice) is excluded from and dialectically critiques conceptual space (representation of space). First, Taylor’s near inability to verbalize or rationally express his objection is typical of experiential space and spatial practices in modernity, which, under the yoke of the lethal omnipresence of signs making up representations of space, exceed language. Taylor’s meaning is something like “you have no idea about the way people actually live” or “there’s a difference between theory and practice” or even “what kind of paradise doesn’t have fried food?” However, he is forced to gather ephemeral serial behaviors and practices, the whole social structure surrounding working-class comfort food and neighborhood merchants as providers of public space, under the sign of the chippie. Second, Taylor’s insistence that something is missing from this apparently all-encompassing model points to the lack at the heart of the garden city and representations of space dependent on the logic of the miniature in general.

Susan Stewart demonstrates that the authority of the miniature derives from its assurance that a system of signification (and thus a given social order) is stable and remains the same – means as much – no matter how infinitesimal the physical scale of the signifier. As Grierson notes, the model garden city even contains the detail of scale fruit trees and, he is sure, although it exceeds his perception, the proper amount of insects. What always escapes a miniature is not, then, information per se, but rather a narrative, a certain way of viewing and organizing the world. What a view from the outside can never contain is the embodied self. Taylor recognizes that fish and chip shops are missing because he is able to project himself into the model. He does not simply take the relations of production produced by the arrangement of the model’s elements as a given but imagines himself traversing, activating, and becoming subject to them. In doing
so, he exchanges space as a visual object for space as an engulfing, multisensory experience – and realizes that the model is a representation of space that is uninhabitable. The narrative that Taylor evokes to test and counter the exaggeration of the miniature is characterized by engulfment, embeddedness, disproportion, irrationality, and a sense of inclusion and collectivity. Stewart calls this inversion of the miniature the gigantic. Just as the narrative of the miniature is crucial to the production of conceptual space constitutive of abstract space, so too is the gigantic crucial to the experiential space that abstract space suppresses but cannot erase.

An Uninhabitable Eden

Sandwiched neatly between the European films and the New York cycle, produced at the behest of a major planning organization, proscribing the form of the city instead of describing it, exhibited at an international gathering devoted to the future of urban planning, Steiner and Van Dyke’s film has always fit somewhat awkwardly into discussions of the city symphony. This is evident in the Griersonian documentary tradition’s claiming the film for the “directive documentary” tradition without so much as a mention of the symphonic nature of the film’s montage structure. It is also the rational for the ex-communication of the film from the symphony canon by both Scott MacDonald and Keith Beattie, who argue for it as an “urban planning offshoot” of the city film, with only the New York section worthy of inclusion or analysis as a proper symphony. These studies attribute the New York segment’s pleasure to its complex, rapid, and exciting editing; they emphasize formalism and absent space itself from critique. More production-oriented accounts, such as Howard Gillette or William Alexander’s, explain the same segment as an expression of the filmmakers’ sense of “fun” and “amusement,” which they were obligated by the sponsors to excise from the “serious” rural sections. Both critiques lead to the conflation of “excitement” with urbanity and boredom with the countryside, resulting in a model in which the
present/future is always already urban and the past similarly rural, recapitulating the film’s argument even as they testify to that argument’s failures. In the literature that treats The City as a city symphony or debates its status as such, this division is often a pretext for downplaying the symphonic qualities of the other sections – all of which concatenate spatially distinct but related phenomena within a dawn-dusk structure – further reifying the modern-urban-montage matrix as a prelude to a medium specific claim about cinema’s innate affinity for the city as a symphonic subject. Although lacking a medium-specific inflection, the opposition between urban and rural is central not only to contemporary theoretical accounts but also to reviews and essays dating from the film’s release.

Several contemporary reviews, mostly notably Archer Winsten’s in The New York Post and Mumford’s own in The New Yorker, followed the film’s logic and discussed it as the division between past and future, with the final section isolated as a not entirely convincing hypothesis appended onto “the year’s most successful film of fact.” But more common is the opinion first articulated by Architectural Review’s anonymous critic. Rather than oppose the future city to the city’s history, this dominant account of the film divides the text based on the kinds of spaces featured, opposing the pastoral settings of the opening and conclusion to the centers of industry and commerce that form the film’s middle sections. Moreover, like MacDonald’s, these accounts are qualitative, turning on the “excitement” present in and generated by the urban sections and its absence from the rural segments. Grierson similarly relates his spectatorial affinity for the New York section in particular as evidence of failure on the filmmakers’ part, as their project was allegedly the disavowal of the alienated, decaying “megalopolis” this city embodied.

Critics who follow Grierson’s treatment of the film as a social or expository documentary similarly focus on its “failures.” These failures include the unconvincing nature of the Greenbelt finale, the absence of politics from the Pittsburgh section, and the
inappropriate humor of the New York section. Just as Grierson misapprehended *Berlin* as a celebration of the alienating and abstracting qualities of modernity, critiques of *The City* erroneously focus on the film’s inability to convey accurately the innate “pleasant” qualities of Greenbelt and the “unpleasant” qualities of New York that pre-exist their filming. That is, even as scholars testify to the film’s failure, they assume that its project and the kind of space to which it is dedicated is tenable, missing the film’s revelation of the shortcomings of the garden city.

For example, the earliest and most sustained discussion of the film after the initial reviews is Martin Medhurst and Thomas Benson’s “*The City*: the Rhetoric of Rhythm.” This article contends that the film’s argument on behalf of the garden city is constructed through the relative speed of montage in each segment, with the Shirley section making use of lyrical tracking shots, the Pittsburgh and New York sections containing disorienting, fast, hard cuts, and the Greenbelt section mediating between the two extremes. The authors conclude, however, that “there is something about the rhythm in the greenbelt village that while correct is unconvincing.”23 They argue that the montage is too moderate, too perfect, and suggest that, to better convey the true potential and pleasure of the garden city, the directors “might have relied less on the rhythms of the country and more on the rhythms of the city.”24

In the literature to date, the two opposing spaces that emerge from the film – the urban and the rural – are read as evidence of the film’s failure to properly figure a singular, unified spatio-temporal map of the American city. That is, the “mislocation” of enjoyment in New York instead of Greenbelt and the “bland, unmemorable, flat” representation of the garden city plan are attributed to mistakes of filmic translation and cinematography rather than to the underlying nature of the representation of space that the garden city is in and of itself.25 The film is understood in terms of obfuscation and elision instead of revelation. Such a model not only repeats the mistake of treating city symphonies as representational structures instead of productions of space, it also engages
in an imitative fallacy: these accounts insist on distinguishing between “two kinds of cities” as if this typology is not partially created by the film itself. I argue instead that *The City*’s Greenbelt – with its infantilized population and dormitory lives, moribund innovation and hermetically sealed family units – produces the nature of the garden city with perfect accuracy. The New York section is so markedly different from the rest of the film because it produces “the city” as experiential, rather than conceptual, space, and simultaneously exchanges the exaggeration of the miniature for that of the gigantic. The film is not structured by two opposed forms or two opposed locations, but by two inimical narratives. *The City* is not so much a flawed argument in favor of the dominant mode of urban planning in 1939 as it is a prescient, entirely effective critique of that mode. Read through this lens, *The City* emerges as a major transitional text within the city symphony tradition.

The Ungainly Symphony

The first shot in *The City* depicts a waterwheel suspended over a pond, figuring the relationship and dichotomy between the mechanical and natural world that will serve as its thesis in miniature. This tableau dissolves into a long shot that begins the visual analysis of a farmhouse, culminating with a close-up that captures a plaque reading “Sias Farm 1791” on its roof. In a sequence that lasts no more than thirty seconds, the viewer has been transported into the revolutionary era, with the plaque functioning as a diegetic title card. After a brief visual tour of the farm’s environs, the voiceover begins, claiming, “a century or two ago we started building cities to suit our needs.” The film then presents a series of activities associated with colonial America – specifically New England – including barrel making, town meetings, etc. The sequence culminates with a tracking shot of the light through maple leaves taken from the bed of a moving horse-drawn wagon. The reverse shot reveals this to have been the point of view of the young boy laying on his back in the wagon, who then rises from it and walks across the rise of a hill,
surveying the town beyond in an extended point of view tracking shot [figure A7]. This shot captures and composes the sensory data and visual observations compiled by the film’s prelude, providing an organizational outside vantage point that mimics Howard’s original sketches of Garden Cities. Thus, Shirley becomes a typical miniature. However, one of a miniature’s primary characteristics is the freezing or displacement of historical time and of the labor of construction/progress.26

Therefore, if The City is to marry the microcosm of the garden city with Mumford’s justification of it vis-à-vis the usable past, then each segment of the film must occupy two disparate epochs, both producing and suspending historical progress. Each scene must represent a discernable historical period, arranged as a linear progressive history, but each must also somehow occur in the present, so that the film is surveying and commenting upon extant social conditions. This ambiguity is first felt through the figure of the boy, whose sight reduces Shirley to a past glory even as his body drags it partially back into the present. This occurs in several ways. The first is the clothing worn by the boy, who is dressed in denim overalls and plaid shirt, looking more like Tom Joad than Johnny Tremain. The second is the remainder of the voiceover narration, which is delivered in the present tense, so that “a century or two ago” is also today. While this aural present describes the progression of the seasons over the course of a year, the mise-en-scène and cinematography clearly indicate that the entire section occurs during a single morning.

While Medhurst and Benson, Grierson and Alexander, continually describe the Shirley sequence as overly simple in terms of the space it constructs, its temporal structure becomes ever more complex. For example, the time of a single lifespan is intimated through the initial image of the boy, who is joined by increasingly older adults and is seen walking through a graveyard toward the end of the segment. But this visual intimation of the passage of time is contained and contrasted by the overlay of the narrator’s description of a season-based work cycle; the graveyard in fact appears as the
narrator completes his description of harvest time. Thus the cyclic nature of agrarian labor is extended to the lives spent in it, which are implied to be as renewable as the product.

The film’s entire thesis – that where space is subordinated to human needs, an individual’s determination of his or her own daily life is ensured – is legible in the transition from the colonial section to the industrial section. The narrator completes his collapse of an individual lifespan and centuries-long political history: “First we built the church, and then we built the town hall, so we could discuss what needed to be done. We disagree sometimes, but there are no serious differences. We work for ourselves, if you can call performing such healthy and vital tasks ‘work.’” This description accompanies an establishing shot of a blacksmith’s forge that dispenses with the segment’s signature long, smooth tracking shots in favor of a series of four abrupt shots that cut increasingly closer to the forge, eventually framing out the smith and leaving only the image of fire in the forge. The voiceover drops out and the image fades to black, with Copeland’s triumphant theme diminishing, only to reemerge in a minor key. Both reappear over a series of shots that cut back out to reveal the ravaged outskirts of Pittsburgh and its steel plants, a cityscape composed through the device of a steelworker’s fraught commute home at the end of his shift. The worker, first viewed at the top of a skree slope, walks home along the edge of a hill in the foreground while in the background the whole unhappy valley lies curled in the arms of surrounding mountains [figure A8]. The section’s overture reinscribes the logic of the miniature and imposes a continuity between Shirley and Pittsburgh. Both locations narrate representations of space and produce space as a concept, covering over the illogic of the film’s dual insistence on historical evolution and simultaneous, spatially diverse phenomena through the consistency and durable proportionality of the microcosm.

Just as the implied historical epoch has shifted from the colonial era to the industrial revolution, the “day” has progressed from the morning of the previous section
to the early evening, which is further specified as a winter evening through the clothing worn by the steelworker and others glimpsed in Pittsburgh. Compounding the disjuncture evident in the image, a concomitant major shift occurs in the narrator’s vocabulary. The diction of the voiceover drops, evoking the working and immigrant class, and all forms of the first person disappear, replaced by a series of implied command statements: “Build faster! Higher! Production for production!” Alexander argues that the disembodied nature of these commands, which have no origin or locus, effectively offers an alibi to their real-life issuers, who include the sponsoring Carnegie Corporation; a company with an originary role in the oppressive conditions endured by workers in Pittsburgh. However, in the image track, the directionless and inhuman nature of the commands is juxtaposed with looming close-ups of heavy machinery. It is as though these directives issue from the newly dominant machines themselves, which are no longer subordinated to human need or closely tied to use value. Unlike the looms and hoes of the first section, operation of these machines does not require the presence of a person in the shot.

This alienation is echoed in the voiceover’s description of the populace who, for the first and only time in the film, are not described as “we” but as “you.” While the second person can denote an ambiguous referent, gesturing to both the third and first persons, the image track makes it clear that “you” is better understood as “them.” In this section, the visual track contains only “sick” bodies—an amputee, dirt-streaked children, obese women—who are never represented as collectively constructing a public space, as with the town hall shots of the first section. Moreover, even as the narrator adopts a non-standard English diction, the portraits of the populace focus on markers of class and ethnic difference; the only bodies in the film figured as impure are also non-white. Like Berlin, spatial and bodily contrasts are overdetermined. The health of the bodies in Shirley match the health of the town, the health of the particular social ordering for which the town stands, the “health” of the Revolutionary Era, and thus of America itself. Similarly, the sickness of the bodies inhabiting Pittsburgh proves the sickness of the city,
of factory towns in general, and the sickly, atypical qualities of social relations during the Industrial Revolution – to which America’s future will not be subject and which has no bearing on the country’s “true” nature.

The sequence ends with a hard cut to the first vertically composed shot of the film. The shot, framed from within a narrow street at a low angle, contains extreme shadow on the left and right, formed by the buildings on either side of the alley. The alley dead-ends into the blinding brightness of the shot’s center, which depicts the lower floors, but not the base, of a skyscraper whose top is not visible [figure A9]. Thus, we do not visualize or regard New York from afar, but rather begin already within it, subject to its unique spatial logic and practices. This shot, where the top and bottom of the building are missing, which fails to provide all contextual cues or a sense of orientation, is clearly supposed to express the overwhelming and alienating qualities of modernity, testifying to modernity’s function as foil to the microcosm of the garden city. However, by eschewing an outside vantage point and an establishing shot, locating the viewer at street level and suggesting the city as an engulfing environment rather than a thought experiment, the shot instead conveys the qualities of the gigantic and of experiential space, resulting in the composition of a new spatial narrative that opposes the film’s governing logic.

In her recent study of the film, Vojislava Filopcevic argues that The City’s indebtedness to Pare Lorentz’s rural documentaries result in its inability to figure a community or an American “public” in urban spaces, absenting the vocabulary of citizenship and participatory democracy from the city. Filopcevic’s argument turns on the ejection of the collective through the elision of the representational space of the skyline in the New York section. By contrast, I argue that the skyline as usually figured is not a representational space, is not a monument in dialogue with the population, but is rather an iconic representation of space. The skyline thrusts the viewer outside the city and attempts to master its multiple and contradictory spatial practices by reducing it to a panorama – and so to a miniature. Thus, Filopcevic misplaces the space of the collective.
As Stewart claims, the hot, blind, crowded space at the foot of the giant is the only place a public can gather. As the New York section demonstrates, it also allows for the narration of space as a (collective) experience.

The New York section succeeds in producing a collective through an engulfment by and traversal of space. This section is the only one in which citizens actually speak for themselves, in locally accented voiceovers; the soundtrack is consistently invaded by the voices of telephone operators, doctors, waitresses, and others. The space of the city is similarly fragmented and multiplied. Where the other sections each depict a single, thematically appropriate time of day, the New York section crafts the typical city symphony borders of daybreak and dusk. Furthermore, Filopcevic’s point is complicated by the segment’s depiction of appropriated, monumental space. Unlike the Shirley, Pittsburgh, and Greenbelt sections, which excise any built structure that could function as a recognizable landmark or symbol of the city under examination, New York nominates itself through signage and monument, with the Woolworth Building, the Stock Exchange and Broadway prominent throughout, but glimpsed in their context, from the point of view of the crowd passing by their base. They do not stand for the city, but help mark one’s progress through it. Moreover, the inhabitants represent themselves as New Yorkers in their presence on the soundtrack – where they reference local issues, expressed in regional vocabulary – rather than as an undifferentiated metonymy for an American “we the people.” Just as the voices of the citizens invade the space of the expository voiceover, their movement within shots often sets them into a motion that contrasts with both the editing and Aaron Copeland’s score, whose dissonant and threatening chords are challenged by the competence and happiness registered and performed by the bodies it attempts to speak.

This is particularly evident in the “street problem” sections of the film, where the score’s insistent horns – whose rapid increase and decrease in volume mimics a passing car’s Doppler effect – evoke the never-ending onslaught of traffic. The subjects of the
shots, however, are pedestrians whose purposeful strides across the street and rapid left-right-left scans for vehicles and navigational opportunities create a rhythm and suggest a sense of mastery of the environment at odds with the aural cues. Moreover, these voyagers are always acting in a frame filled with complex action and background sights; the sheer unruliness of space the narration decries finally seems to overcome even the rhetoric of this narration itself. The New York section displays the exact kind of dense, mixed-use space against which *The City* inveighs. However, the section does not produce mixed-use space as a conceptual problem, but rather foregrounds the daily strategies used to negotiate and live within this space, and it is this experiential aspect of the space that appears so at odds with the concepts that attempt to denigrate it.

This extends even to the New York section’s critique of mass culture in the automat sequence, where the rapid close-up shots of out-of-control toasters and omelets are emphasized by the narrator’s frenzied warnings about the damaging pace of modern life, only to be countered by the intercut medium shots of people leisurely eating, smoking, chatting, and reading newspapers. After this sequence, the narrator disappears from the soundtrack, replaced by nurses, waitresses, and authoritative doctors. In having New York speak itself, its residents are perhaps abjected from Shirley’s “we” as much as the “you’s” of Pittsburgh, but because these sociologically inscribed subjects speak for themselves instead of being spoken by the narrator’s lowered diction, what emerges is the locally accented voice of a city that performs agency and competency on both the audible and visual level. Even as the narrator and the score try to suggest a rhythm out of control, what is actually shown is citizen mastery of that rhythm and the creation of individual spatial practices compounded by a series of close-ups that individuate members of the crowd as they turn to address the camera inquisitively, even as a kind of communal rhythm also develops.

That the New York section comprises not a shift in the film’s formal language but rather the interjection of a new narrative – a different knowledge (*connaissance*) of space
is evident in the laborious transition between its end and the Greenbelt section’s beginning. The transitions between Shirley and Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh and New York are instantaneous, accomplished through hard cuts and fade-outs that suggest the move between each section is a move forward in time. But although New York and Greenbelt appear to occupy the same epoch, they are emphatically separated in terms of both screen time and space in an attempt to preserve the proportionate logic of the miniature and the “single-use” dicta of the garden city.

The voiceover insists that garden cities are not suburbs, but *The City*’s image track shows Greenbelt being reached by exiting New York in cars and driving on the highway. The “bad” highways that currently serve the modern city cannot lead to utopia, and so the segment concludes with a series of accidents shot on stock footage, or presented as still photographs. The film restarts with an aerial shot that depicts the Hoover Dam and a series of parkways, which are de-linked from any previously represented space by intervening shots of forested mountains. What is important here is not any logical spatial orientation – the Dam is much farther west than any other site in the film, and the highways take the familiar knotted form of “the cloverleaf” that exists from New Jersey to Los Angeles. Rather, the film’s use of aerial photography re-establishes the narrative of the miniature after its disruption by New York’s gigantic and points to the fact that the film is structured not by the opposition of urban and rural space but by the mutual exclusion of space as a concept and space as an experience [figure A10]. Only through an inversion of vantage point can the film situate and depict Greenbelt, which may occupy the same time as New York, but exemplifies an utterly distinct spatial narrative.

The structure of the film positions Greenbelt as the city’s future – and the final narration makes this explicit, as a possible future that must be chosen by the viewer. However, *The City*’s attempt to trace the proportionate qualities of what it already a microcosmic exaggeration and fit it into the miniaturization of American history the
film’s overall structure composes results in an extreme heightening of temporal ambiguity and the collapse of spatial differentiation. Throughout the Greenbelt section, the narrator again speaks of “we” in the present tense: “There are no cars here. We can walk to work and come home for lunch, just like the kids.” This above narration accompanies the depiction of a baseball game played by adults. The doubling of the miniature results in the final halting and compression of time where even the difference between adults and children is suppressed.

Where the Pittsburgh and New York sections depict the problems arising from the mixed use of spaces and the difficulty of moving from spaces of production to spaces of leisure, the Greenbelt section insists on the segregation of uses and the ease of navigation in which this will result. The slow yet disjointed pans used to convey this differentiation of spaces and facilitation of movement depict vacation spots, laboratories, houses, and public buildings. It is impossible, however, to determine the spatial relations of one to the other, and shots of each reveal nearly identical backgrounds. The rationally planned, self-sufficient garden city comes to resemble a disorienting, nightmarishly claustrophobic moebius strip in which schools look exactly like factories. By the end of the film, nature metaphors come to dominate both the voiceover and the visual track. As the narrator claims that “human beings need good food, light and space to grow,” shots of workers leaving factories dissolve to shots of trees, which mimic the boy’s point of view shot of the leaves from the first section. The entire film has become a loop: the space of the past becomes the space of the future, which is simultaneously the present, fringed around the edges by an ahistorical “we the people” who are only able to view space, not occupy it.

The obsessive need to construct urban history as progressive history that is simultaneously a cyclic history – where Greenbelt is Shirley and the future is the past – has the uncanny effect of collapsing history entirely until all that exists is a single day. This day is implied by the careful correlation of Shirley with morning, Pittsburgh with dusk and Greenbelt with the unstructured time of leisure – which, as in Berlin, suggests
the afternoon, the weekend, and summer – so that the common metaphor of a nation’s history as its “day” is constructed. The New York section, however, ruptures this metaphor. If the dawn-dusk structure of a city symphony is only evident when the above segments are taken together, it also emerges fully formed in the New York segment alone, which details a complete day. Just as the chorus of citizens disrupts and contests the “voice of god” narration within the segment, the segment as a whole performs a similar function in the entire film. The emergence of New York as social, experiential space with its own synchronic “day” – a spatio-temporal entity that Grierson claims registers as more real than the remainder of the film – subverts the mental space of “modernity” as a stop on the film’s conceptual itinerary from the pre-revolutionary pastoral to the garden city and daybreak to sunset. The result is that the present cannot be successfully integrated into the film’s map of American history but rather exists as an equal, alternative figuration of space outside of this map, an experiential space that points out conceptual space’s limits.

The Labyrinth’s Silence

Experiential space incorporates the citizen into the rhythms and practices of the everyday and, in doing so, halts the transformation of itinerary into map. However, as Taylor’s sputtering outburst implies, experiential space’s escape from the lethal regime of signs comes at the cost of its ability to articulate itself as intelligible language or narrative. Stewart, too, notes that, just as the miniature’s excess of compressed meaning tends to encourage or demand description, the gigantic, in its guises as collective identity, grotesquerie, or the sublime, tends to forbid description, replacing it with a sense of inarticulate awe or fear. The gigantic, as experiential space, exceeds speech and conceptualization. This is evident in the literature surrounding The City. Canonic accounts continually seek to capture the integral qualities of content or form that make the New York section so different from the remainder of the film, but always rely on
contrasting comparisons that situate New York in relation to the film’s other spaces. Even as they seek to reify the urban-rural divide, they cannot describe either independently of the other. They cannot describe the New York section in and of itself. Grierson’s evocative description of the film exemplifies this approach:

> I remember a lot of lyrical *up-bubbling life* in those children *playing dangerously* on New York sidewalks. I remember, too, the *domestic vitality* of people going out into the chaos of holiday traffic to the country. I remember the zing of the switch from the – rather anemic – scenes of rustic bliss to the industrial world …. Steiner and Van Dyke try to tell us they are all against metropolitan madness, that they are sick of its wastes, its dangers, its damnations … But the road to heaven twists … What I am getting at is that I do not believe Steiner and Van Dyke believe a word of it any more than I do; and I have the proof of it the moment they shoot those children on the sidewalk, the clamor of the industrial scene, or the *open sesame* of the automat. Like myself, they are metropolitans. Their cameras get an edge on and defeat their theories [emphasis mine].

Grierson continually relies on adverbs and adjectival constructs – as opposed to the simple nominative forms he uses elsewhere in the review to refer to Shirley and Greenbelt. Where Grierson comfortably and directly recounted “the acrobats of Greenbelt” and “the apple trees of Shirley,” he here recalls how people acted in relation to space: children play “dangerously,” adults join a traffic jam with “vitality.” What is it, exactly, to play dangerously? With “domestic vitality?” The passage consistently talks around space instead of speaking of it. Although Grierson begins by noting “up-bubbling life,” he cannot describe the streets and space from which that life is produced, instead turning again and again to the ephemeral qualities of people and things e.g. vitality, “open sesame.” The import of these scenes is their difference from or testing of the remainder of the film. They are the “twist” in the utopian road, but Grierson is powerless to imagine what a road, to heaven or elsewhere, solely composed of such spaces might look like.

Grierson, like Taylor, stutters over his narration of experiential space. The resistance of such space to narrative and description is not limited to the first half of the
twentieth century but instead endures as a critical aspect of space in postmodernity.\textsuperscript{35} The unspeakable nature of space as it is lived is perhaps best captured in Michel de Certeau’s 1986 diptych of New York as conceptual and experiential space in \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}. De Certeau recounts his view of the city from the top of the World Trade Center, where, from the vantage provided by “the tallest letters in the world,” the city lays itself out in front of the viewer as a “frozen sea of signs,” endlessly narratable as the proportionate relations of the miniature. Descending onto the street, de Certeau finds that instead of a wordy reader, he becomes a silent writer, composing his itinerary in footsteps, finally finding himself on a street so full of history and meaning that it forbids all attempts at description and signification, limiting his knowledge of space to immediate bodily sensations.\textsuperscript{36} The experience of this walk is only communicable as a shrug of the shoulders and a rueful “I feel good here,” which tells exactly as little and exactly as much as Taylor’s plea for fish and chip shops. The recourse to fish and chip shops, to a shrug, to periphrasis instead of description is not a failing of Taylor, Grierson, or de Certeau. Rather, the incommunicability of experiential space and intelligibility of conceptual space are the products of abstract space’s disarticulation of representations of space, representational space, and spatial practices. By imposing a hegemony of representations of space, appropriating representational spaces, and marginalizing spatial practices, abstract space sunders conceptual space from experiential space.

Bernard Tschumi, a member of the architectural neo-avant-garde and a theorist of space, describes this separation as the opposed figures of the pyramid and the labyrinth. A pyramid, like the ones constructed by Howard and Mumford in their greenbelt towns, allows for an analysis of space, and even the revelation of and reckoning with the power relations that produce the space, but forbids spatial praxis. The labyrinth, like the New York section or de Certeau’s walk, admits for the practice of space, but excludes the possibility of analysis.\textsuperscript{37} This division ensures that space cannot be experienced and
conceptualized at the same time. To bridge this gap is to produce differential space, which not only fractures the hegemony of abstract space but also relinks conceptual space and experiential space.\textsuperscript{38}

*The City* is able to build such a bridge only by failing as a coherent text. The space of the New York section is nothing particularly remarkable in itself; experiential space and spatial practices are always recoupable by abstract space. Stewart, for example, notes that the attraction of the gigantic is in part that it promises the exact dominant vantage its size and the subject’s current humble position denies: you can always climb the mountain, ascend the tower, or wait for the end of the parade.\textsuperscript{39} The New York section is important because it disrupts the remainder of the film; as Grierson and Taylor’s work implies, it literally speaks another language and seems to produce another narrative entirely. It cannot be analyzed with the schema produced by Shirley, Greenbelt, and Philadelphia. In turn, it posits an alternative historiography to the usable past written by the other sections. The New York section in itself is only experiential space; *The City* as a whole fractures abstract space because it encompasses incompatible rhythms, logics, and stories.

However, the film is powerless to re-link a concept of space with the experience of space, to express a representation of space that certain spatial practices could produce, to articulate a theory of space from within the walls of the labyrinth – to produce differential space. Similarly, Taylor’s irritated outburst attempts to express those aspects of space that escape language, that make space inhabitable. He is reduced, however, to using a metaphoric emblem (the fish and chip shop) to indicate these qualities, one that still reduces them to the built environment and not the itineraries and events that structure and delimit it. The fracturing of abstract space in *The City* and its indirect or comparative production of experiential space poses two questions. First, to what extent and under what circumstances could a film entirely and solely produce experiential space? Second, assuming this is possible, how could a thread be run through this cinematic labyrinth,
retaining a trace of space as a concept? This would relink experiential and conceptual space, not only fracturing abstract space but producing differential space and the possibility of another social ordering.

If Grierson’s critique of *The City* does nothing else, it demonstrates that tonal and overtonal montage is not innately productive of abstract space. All of Grierson’s praise for the New York section turns on his impression of speed and the interconnection shared by people and their possessions in an urban environment characterized by an onslaught of sensory input. These are the exact characteristics usually attributed to overtonal montage in city symphonies and the same ones he denigrates in *Berlin*. Clearly, it is the spatial function to which montage is tied and not the form itself that proves problematic; in the case of *The City*, montage is crucial to the production of experiential space. Montage serves the same function in the progenitor of the mid-century New York city symphony cycle, *Weegee’s New York*. Moreover and more important, *Weegee’s* brings out another quality of montage. Because it engenders causal connections and comparisons between diverse locations and phenomena, montage has an innate narrative quality. While this quality can easily be recruited to reproduce the “lethal regime of signs” as it does in *Berlin*, it can also provide the needed thread to imbue experiential space with a trace of logic. *Weegee’s New York* is able to produce experiential space directly – and relink it to conceptual space – in large part through the use of overtonal montage.
Notes

1 Stein also secured additional funding from the Carnegie Corporation.


3 Anne Friedberg suggests that one of cinema’s ontological qualities as a technology of modernity is its suggestion or effect of time travel in Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). However, her examples either trade on fictionalized depictions of time-altering technology, as in Paris qui dort, or ethnographically-aligned travelogues that figure the difference between self and other as the temporal difference between modernity and primitivism.


5 Over the course of Mumford’s long career, his writing generally shifted to encompass more local and universal/humanist concerns, held in tension with this nationalist stance. Wojtowicz charts this complex evolution and convincingly connects Mumford’s life-long ambivalence to exceptionalist ideology and comprehensive planning with his engagement with the American modernist humanist traditions in architecture, planning, and literature, 7-15.

6 This anxiety was powerfully felt in Europe after world war one and various revolutions and is most clearly expressed in Otto Spangler’s The Decline of the West.

7 Stewart, 52-53.

8 Grierson, 77-78. The World Beyond War was never distributed or exhibited, and appears to have been in initial planning stages around the same time The City was first released. Basil Wright was attached as a co-producer with Grierson. John Taylor was to direct, 76. Grierson originally reviewed The City in Films 1.1 (November 1939): 85-89. This review was reprinted Grierson on Documentary, 76-79. He mentions World Beyond War in both Films and Grierson. All my citations are taken from the latter.

9 “Utopia” and “utopian” are fraught and contested terms in film studies and related humanities fields. Both are often use as common-sense descriptors of real-world projects that figure a particular model of the good society, particularly as it relates to or is derived from the built environment; rational-comprehensive urban planning in general and the garden city model in particular exemplify this sense of the term. Moreover, the diegeses of fiction films may themetize or narrativize certain spaces and social orderings as indicative of the good life (as in the space of the number in musicals) or of its opposite (the dystopian novum that motivates many science fiction films). In this case, such spaces are often set off against narrative spaces marked as normative and/or contiguous with contemporary society. The politics of utopia are equally complex, with Frederic Jameson arguing for it as a form with the singular capacity for an effective critique of late capitalism and others, including Vivian Sobchack, suspicious of it as an evacuation of political critique. For the purposes of this dissertation, I follow Louis Marin’s
understanding of utopia as a figuration of the unfigurable – of infinite liberty as perfectly controlled harmony – that works as a plural, neutral limit. That is, the neutral, like the supplement, is the span between two opposed terms, opening a space within discourse that cannot be enunciated. In its operational procedures, a utopian text is the constitution of a discourse as a space. It is in Marin’s sense that I consider city symphonies as utopic (or spatial plays on the neutral).


12 The account that most insistently emphasizes the influence of this family of planning concepts is also the source of their best-known critique: Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 12-27.

13 Stewart, 43-45.

14 Stewart defines the gigantic in opposition to the miniature in her introduction and also at length, 66-70.


16 Beattie, 40; MacDonald, *Garden*, 156.

17 MacDonald, *Garden*, 158.

18 Gillette, 77.

19 See Beattie, 41; and MacDonald, 153-4.


22 Grierson *Grierson on Documentary*, 76-79.


24 ibid, 72.
Any account of the film that attempts to deal with the film as a social/expository documentary participates in this tradition. See Gillette and Alexander and especially the conclusion of Medhurst and Benson.

Stewart, 43-48.

Alexander, 250.

The viewer is directly addressed in the film’s final moments in the second person as well: “you take your choice. The gutter or the playground…” In this case, however, “you” is not only granted an agency distinctly lacking in the industrial scenes but also connotes an individual. By contrast, the use in the Pittsburgh section connotes a plural second person, an atomized “you” not quite deserving the formality of “one” and incapable of integration into the democracy of “we.”

In a sense, this moment of racialized discourse points to the segregated nature of garden cities, which did not admit people of color. Both bodies like these and the heavy industry on which they depend for a living were banned by the charters of Greenbelt and Radburn.

Filopcevic, 84-87.

Grierson, 76.

Stewart, 75.

This characterizes not only the somewhat primitive critiques of Medhurst, Gillette, and Benson, but the more subtle and capacious analyses of Alexander and Filopcevic as well.

Grierson, 77.

Narration and description often serve as a binary, most notably in the work of Georg Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972). Stewart, too, notes that the tableaux of the miniature excludes narration in this sense. However, as Marin and, less directly, Giluiana Bruno have argued, in travel narratives the two modes are synonymous. Marin, Utopics, 18-45; Bruno, Streetwalking, 176-77, 208-09. Within the relations produced by abstract space, conceptual space ensures that description is always already narrated, and experiential space excludes both narration and direct description.

de Certeau, 91-93.


ibid, 27-32.

Stewart, 90.

Although the film circulated nationally through Cinema 16, it apparently did not pass into the possession of either the Filmmakers Cooperative Distribution Center or
Anthology Film Archives after Cinema 16’s dissolution. Instead, with Weegee’s other films and photographs, *Weegee’s New York* was given to the New York International Center for Photography. The film, which has not undergone restoration or preservation, is still held by them. Their copy dates from 1953-54 when Vogel first added a soundtrack; the film was originally screened without sound. Of the more than 10,000 feet of footage originally shot for this twenty-minute film, some is lost, and some orphans have turned up in the Amos Vogel papers at the Wisconsin Center. This latter group includes work prints Scott MacDonald thinks may have once been included in earlier, longer versions of the finished film.
CHAPTER III
THREADING THE LABYRINTH: PARTIALITY, THE TEXTUAL CITY, AND WEEGEE’S NEW YORK

The island of Manhattan is … a poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions of permanent residents but whose full meaning will always remain elusive.

E.B. White, *Here Is New York*

*Berlin* and *The City* unify multiple, diverse spaces in a microcosmic narrative exaggeration. They thereby reinscribe the relations of production instantiated by abstract space, forbid the re-linking of experiential space with conceptual space, and thus the production of differential space. By contrast, *Weegee’s New York* disarticulates several locations in its two stylistically divergent sections, allowing for a glimpse of the distortion inherent in the smooth proportionality of late modernity’s abstract space. Moreover, *Weegee’s* isolates, analyzes, and subverts the signs associated with each location so that every place assumes a new status as both lived and logical space independent of other places, disrupting the induced unity of abstract space and re-linking space as experience with space as concept. Through these tactics, *Weegee’s New York* offers spaces that narrate an alternate social order instead of being narrated by the régime of signs comprising abstract space.

Shot by Weegee (Arthur Felig) over the course of several years, the exhibition version of *Weegee’s New York* depicts two days in the life of the five boroughs.1 *Weegee’s* is divided into two sections. The first, “New York Fantasy,” focuses on the monuments and spectacle of Midtown Manhattan. “Fantasy” generally abstracts or eschews individuated human figures, devoting itself to portraits of specific areas or structures like the Empire State Building. Both the built environment and the people who traverse it are defamiliarized through the insistent use of distorting wide-angle shots,
canted framing, time-lapse photography, and optical special effects, such as the doubling of objects or construction of irrational vanishing points via the highly reflective surface of mylar. The second section, “A Day at Coney Island,” leaves behind these effects. Solely featuring the beach, boardwalk, and ocean abutting the amusement park at Brooklyn’s Coney Island, this section emphasizes Weegee’s photographic trademark invasive close-ups, candid shots, and crowd scenes. The built environment recedes from view as leisure activities and personal behavior in the public sphere are studied.

Its basic organization and structure alone suggest Weegee’s opposition to its predecessors. Both this opposition and the film’s differential function become clearer if its initial exhibition context is considered. Cinema 16, one of the largest subscription-based film societies in the United States in the post-war era, first exhibited Weegee’s in an unfinished form at a Chelsea gallery in March 1948 and included the finished work in its first subscription program a few months later in June. Cinema 16 repeatedly featured the film in its programming, and acted as its official distributor. In fact, founder Amos Vogel is often credited as a co-director. Weegee was a dedicated member of the society and approached Vogel with more than 10,000 feet of raw footage in late 1947, which Vogel edited down into its final form.²

Cinema 16 was deeply intertwined with the post-war New York avant-garde and instrumental in both the international dissemination of American independent, documentary, and avant-garde film and the importation and exhibition of global art cinema in the United States.³ Vogel was also invested in unearthing and screening older films alongside new works. In general, his programming strategy was devoted to producing the screening experience as a kind of dialectic montage indebted to Sergei Eisenstein’s concept of the “kino-fist”:

…[I]ndividual programs and seasonal series were usually structured as if each were a meta-film meant to confront the audience in a manner reminiscent of Sergei Eisenstein’s dialectic editing … at Cinema 16 presentations, one form of film collided...
with another in such a way as to create maximum thought – and perhaps action – on the part of the audience. Vogel pursued this strategy both in terms of the individual films he selected and with regard to the organization of each program, which habitually included films that contradicted, challenged, or complicated each other. The space produced by individual films screened might often be aligned with abstract space, but their recombination with other texts resulted in the overlay of repetitions and differences Lefebvre argues is the precondition for the rearticulation of representations of space and lived experiences and therefore the production of differential space. This strategy is evident in the June 3, 1948 program, which featured both *The City* and *Weegee’s*. *Weegee’s* was screened several times by Cinema 16 following this, and garnered enough of a reputation among the members that it was advertised in the Fall 1955 program as “the fabulous press photographer’s legendary impressions of the metropolis, including his famed candid study of life and love in Coney Island [emphasis mine].” However, at the moment of its premiere in 1948, Cinema 16 introduced the film with the dual lures of Weegee’s celebrity status and its striking contrast to its program mate *The City*: “this classic provides a striking counter-point to Weegee’s film.”

Indeed, Vogel’s programming of *The City* is not unusual; the film enjoyed a full and varied afterlife following its 1939 premiere. What was unusual is that, by pairing the film with *Weegee’s*, Vogel attempted to foreground the very internal contradictions and complexities other exhibitors and users of the film attempted to suppress. This suppression dates to the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair itself. Dedicated to “the city of tomorrow,” The Fair enacted the same rational-comprehensive planning with which it was most associated, plowing over an ash heap on the outskirts of Queens to construct what is now Corona Park in Flushing Meadows. Within the Fair, many other exhibits, including GM’s Futurama, mobilized a version of the usable past narrative to naturalize and historically justify their planning projects. Still, as the *Architectural Review* notice demonstrates, some viewers nevertheless registered the discrepancies that were to make
the film famous. In 1943, the film’s backers, working with Van Dyke, attempted to stave off antipathy toward the Greenbelt section by excerpting it from the rest of the footage and repackaging it for John Nesbitt’s newsreel Passing Parade under the title Here Is Tomorrow. Finally, in 1964, master planner Robert Moses turned to The City in a last ditch attempt to revive support for his Lower Manhattan Expressway project. Willfully ignoring both the lessons of the New York section and the film’s overall anti-automotive stance, Moses unsuccessfully borrowed The City’s argumentative structure for his own vanity project This Urgent Need. As might be expected, Vogel’s use of The City is diametrically opposed to that of the Institute, Nesbitt, or Moses. Instead of obfuscating the film’s ambivalence, Vogel exploited it by pairing The City with Weegee’s. Scott MacDonald interprets this counter-point primarily as an opposition of tone – The City condemns the hectic pace and confusion of the urban ensemble, and Weegee’s celebrates it. This drastically oversimplifies the rhetoric of both films and overlooks their true difference: the space produced by each.

Where The City insists that a given place like “New York” is always already intelligible as a sign because it can have only one meaning and use, Weegee’s demonstrates the multiple activities and uses enacted upon a single location and the irreducibility of space to signification. Where The City attempts to concatenate not only national space but also history, Weegee’s is built on the proposition that even the distance from Midtown to Coney and even the distinction between Monday and Sunday cannot be contained in a single constructed “day” but requires two, characterized by divergent formal logics. Where The City is best known for the unintentional and ironic failure of its argument through its contradictory form, Weegee’s professes no argument but the irreducible multiplicity of the urban ensemble through an intentionally bifurcated structure. More important, The City ruptures abstract space by staging the insufficiencies of conceptual space and its opposition to experiential space. By contrast, Weegee’s ostentatious discontinuities produce a unified space. For all their differences of technique,
“Fantasy” and “Coney” do not produce opposed definitions of space like the New York section does in relation to the rest of *The City*. Rather, the juxtaposition of “Fantasy” and “Coney” result in *Weegee’s* spatial unity because both sections produce space as a series of practices constitutive of lived experience. In doing so, *Weegee’s* ruptures the induced unities of abstract space by re-linking representations of space with spatial practices, space as it is conceived with space as it is experienced.

*Weegee’s* is able to “thread the labyrinth,” suggesting a governing logic from within experiential space, because it draws upon a structure of partiality. Partiality inverts the relationship space and narrative usually enjoy in modernity, wherein narrative displaces or covers over space, reducing it to a tale to be told. Both the miniature and the gigantic are examples of the form this telling can take: they create an alibi for the unbridgeable distance between story and space by coupling exaggerated objects with explanatory narratives. Partiality, by contrast, is a kind of anti-exaggeration. It does not appeal to ideas of the normal or the apt – which are exactly what exaggerations imply and frame – but rather re-stages the break between place and story. In doing so, it produces spaces that narrate. Partiality as a structure or a strategy is crucial to the production of differential space in American late modernity because it contests the particular logic that abstract space employs during this period.

The juxtaposition of two divergent exaggerations and experiential space with conceptual space was dialectically enough to fracture abstract space in *The City*. However, as Edward Dimendberg demonstrates in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, ten years after the 1939 Fair ushered in the late modern era, myriad popular representations of space and representational spaces were able to accommodate and resolve such apparent contradictions through the trope of the city as text. Dimendberg argues that this particularly capacious iteration of abstract space can best be understood in terms of its centripetal and serial qualities – the very qualities that *Weegee’s* undoes by drawing on partiality.
New York As Tall Letters

Dimendberg argues that American late modernity was characterized by a concept of space at once less insistent and more stable than the microcosmic miniature: the logic of seriality coupled with the centripetal movement of space. Borrowed from Jean-Paul Sartre’s description of his wanderings in post-war New York, Dimendberg defines seriality as primarily a mode of production “simultaneously addressed to everyone and no one.” Centripetal space is, like the concatenating effects of Berlin and The City, a method for managing the urban ensemble and producing a kind of synoptic view of it. This serial-centripetal model is an evolution of the microcosm: it produces abstract space more resistant to critique or fracture than the microcosm. Where proportionate surface differentiation is crucial to microcosmic logic, a centripetal composition of space results in the impression of a totality in which the shape of the whole is more important than the relation or nature of individual parts. Dimendberg encapsulates serial-centripetality as a spatial logic and mode of address in his example of a waiter’s imagined routine at Grand Central Terminal’s famous Oyster Bar. The waiter works in a monumental space that exerts a kind of centering pull on various urban populations – commuters, vacationers, office workers – at predictable and repeated times of the day. The waiter learns to “read” the never-ending rush around him and can both skim the usual text of the day – recognize and interact with regulars – and more keenly analyze unusual breaks in this liturgy, such as a runner on the bill. The waiter has his place in the routines of others and his own routine produced by the anonymous, repeated rhythm of the centripetal city itself. Seriality thereby accounts for and incorporates both the everyday and the extraordinary.

Dimendberg describes serial-centripetal space as one of several interlocking representations of space that dominate late modernity and are particularly crucial to New York. Perhaps because Dimendberg deals largely with fictional texts, he describes the way in which serial-centripetal space can be used to inflect or structure a narrative, but he does not consider the way in which serial-centripetal logic is a concept or a story about
space in and of itself. Unlike the maniacal organization of the microcosmic miniature, seriality and centripetal space do not artificially banish experiential space; they are capable of including it as a constitutive aspect of the model. Whereas rational-comprehensive planning and the garden city must reduce everything to static, spatialized relations and can be destabilized by any encroachment of temporal progression and experiential space, serial-centripetal space is – to borrow from Grierson and Taylor – studded with fish and chip shops. That is, miniatures can be critiqued or fractured by the gigantic, but seriality cannot. Like the abstract space it reinscribes, it is a hegemonic construct that relates conceptual and experiential space but rewrites experiential space as a series of signs: experiential space is included but always already taken up as narrative. Serial-centripetal space thus reinscribes the dominant relationship of representations of space and spatial practices. In the “lethal regime of signs,” the labyrinth of experiential space is always already “threaded,” and the thread is Ariadne’s. That is, serial-centripetal space produces the labyrinth of experiential space as a dangerous maze that one enters and exits from a more stable home in the “real” world of logic that exists as a problem whose solution is generated from outside, on the slopes of the pyramid and conceptual space. Ariadne’s thread turns each step – each encounter with and experience of space – into an intelligible part of a story that exists in contrast to the unknowable, deadly, unnarratable chaos that yawns to either side of the lighted path.

One of Dimendberg’s key examples, *Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948), clearly demonstrates the ways seriality and centripetal space reduce the city to a series of signs – to a text to be read – while skillfully incorporating spatial practices and views from the street. Where *Berlin* and *The City* are finally anachronistic, anti-modern texts that force the city into a feudal exaggeration, *Naked City* is a distillation of the concepts that organize and produce urban modernity. The film uses location shooting to chronicle a fictional murder investigation from the commission of the crime to the apprehension of the killer. The action is primarily focused through the NYPD’s Homicide Department in
the form of veteran-rookie pair Lt. Muldoon (Barry Fitzgerald) and Det. Halloran (Don Taylor). Their investigation of Jean Dexter’s murder eventually leads them to Frank Niles (Howard Duff), an amateur jewel thief, his unwilling accomplice Dr. Stoneman (House Jameson), and murderer Willie Garzah (Ted de Corsia). This police procedural is elucidated, critiqued, and contextualized in terms of the city’s daily life by the voiceover of one of the film’s producers, radio personality and journalist Mark “Mr. New York” Hellinger.

In addition to its narrative, Naked City’s production history and aesthetics also illuminate the connections between film noir and the classic city symphony as representations of space. In her article “Humanizing the Voice of God,” Sarah Kozloff demonstrates through interviews with key creative personnel that Naked City’s voiceover and its representation of the city was inspired as much by the progressive documentaries of the 1930s and the city symphonies of the 1920s as it was by hard-boiled detective fiction, earlier noirs, or police procedurals. Kozloff cites both The City’s voiceover and Berlin’s daily rhythms as crucial inspirations. Tom Gunning, drawing on Kozloff’s work as well as Dimendberg’s, re-positions the films noir of the late 1940s and early 1950s as part of a cultural constellation that includes contemporary city symphonies such as In the Street. Gunning argues that films like Naked City, which comprise what Paul Schrader called “the documentary turn in noir,” are deeply intertwined with such non-narrative texts as city symphonies because they similarly attempt to map out and account for the overwhelming or invisible connections that constitute late modernity. Dimendberg likewise considers The City a crucial marker of late modernity, and its presentation of urban squalor keenly resonant with that of many noirs, including Naked City. In fact, one of the few city symphonies Naked City hasn’t been placed in conversation with is Weegee’s New York.

Dimendberg claims that Naked City combines the concatenating organization of Berlin and the keen eye of the detective to present and to parse the typical aspects of
urban life, including sensational, initially inexplicable aspects like murder. Naked City’s viewer, much like the waiter, learns to read the rhythms of the city, to recognize disruptions of those rhythms, and to appreciate the city’s ability to account for and counteract those disruptions. At the same time, Hellinger’s knowing commentary on the homicide squad’s activities produces their management of exceptional or shocking crime as routine, as possessing its own rhythms, rules, and space. The city emerges as a problem to be solved. Just as seriality and centripetal space produce conceptual space with the capacity to account for experiential space, Naked City uses a variety of visual and narrative strategies to produce New York as a mass routine. These strategies include: “disaster narrative, aerial views, street scenes, and humanizing narration. Each seeks to … yield a concrete representation of the metropolis and its inhabitants.”

For example, Dimendberg argues that the film’s opening sequence uses aerial views to “collect” the city. Rather than insist on the signifying capacity and proportionality of each urban sign as similar shots do in The City, these shots produce an impression of the built urban environment as a structure in which the whole subsumes the parts. The sequence is comprised of three shots, all long-takes connected by dissolves. The first shot approaches from the island’s southeast, as though originating from the far tower of the Brooklyn Bridge. This shot displays Manhattan’s southern cluster of skyscrapers in the financial and civic districts, as well as the flatlands beyond, in what are now SoHo and Chinatown. The second shot begins at the north-central fringes of this lower area, moving north from the garment district and the Empire State Building and concluding at Central Park. The final shot moves back down to the southern tip of the island along its west side. The effect, as Dimendberg notes, recalls that of a reconnaissance or bombing run, its intent to reassure the viewer of the city’s intact status even as it hints at post-war atomic anxiety and the possibility of future devastation. Dimendberg positions this sequence as a marriage between the new innovation of aerial surveillance photography and the tradition of panoramic romantic landscape. The nausea
of the city under threat is ameliorated by the creation of a unified, centered city through
the presentation of “an overwhelming quantity of visual information whose totality is
more significant than any component.”

Dimendberg argues that this mode of viewing turns on the clear orientation
offered to the viewer, who is addressed as a knowledgeable citizen or “regular,” who
never occupies a completely anonymous, featureless space – and, it is implied, therefore
not a mere part of a machine-like crowd – and can always determine his/her position in
space. Beyond Dimendberg’s analysis, a serial-centripetal space results that gathers and
orients different activities, spaces, and subjects, collecting them under a cluster of
recognizable signs that in time come to further collapse into a single iconic text to be
instantly read. The knowledge that comforts the viewer, and the intact city that makes this
knowledge possible, is a knowledge derived from a dominant representation of space
present in both cultural production and urban planning:

……these [elevated and aerial] photographs rendered the city
in sharp photojournalistic detail rather than in the idioms of
romantic lyricism or modernist abstraction. Frequently conveying
large spatial expanses such as Manhattan Island or the highway
system around the Triboro Bridge, such photographs often adopted
similar viewpoints. Their repetition of standard views proposes
them as a kind of photodocumentary cliché, an image of the city
instantly recognized by everyone.

The viewer, then, is addressed as a “local” to the extent that he or she can recognize the
city as the representation of space that has been repeatedly offered to the world and is
continuously re-inscribed by planners; this kind of shallow knowledge (savoir) is
implicated in centralized power and control.

An aerial view of the city is a view of the city from its front. It exerts the pull of
monuments and centripetal force, addressed to the everybody and nobody that are the
only subject positions seriality makes available. The attraction of Naked City, however, is
that it also offers the view from the back – the detective’s insightful stroll down alleys
and exploration of the secret connections between disparate social classes and locations.
As the film continues, aerial views increasingly motivate street scenes. The film’s main crime scene occurs in a high-rise apartment building. After examining Dexter’s body, Halloran and Muldoon step to the window and examine the busy Upper West Side intersection at their feet. Hellinger’s voiceover notes the view as a challenge: “There’s your city. Take a good look at it. Jean Dexter is dead. The answer must be somewhere down there.” This scene demonstrates that the miniature’s assurance that marks – people and places – continue to signify no matter their physical size is no longer enough. Distance no longer confers mastery but poses a challenge. The detectives must descend to the street, activating, traversing, and experiencing urban space if they are to master and restore the city’s serial rhythm.

The remainder of Naked City alternates between aerial and street views – often in shot-reverse shot pairs – as the crime is solved. Throughout the proceedings, street views come to be associated with a kind of excessive detail that threatens to overwhelm the investigation and engulfs the viewer. This is particularly evident in one of the film’s final sequences, set in the Lower East Side. Halloran, hot on Garzah’s trail, must descend fully into the urban labyrinth, going downtown, leaving the clarity of the grid for the jumbled, crowded warren of sidewalk vendors and street life. The sheer abundance of sensory input obscures Halloran’s goal; old crumbling buildings refuse to display their numbers, and peddler carts make it difficult for patrol cars to penetrate the area. At the same time, however, the area’s status as a residential neighborhood with remnants of pre-modern kinship and communal ties aid the detective.25 As Hellinger’s voiceover sarcastically notes, a simple picture and description of a man shown on a major, anonymous city avenue is unlikely to yield a positive result. In the Lower East Side, however, the corner store is still a repository of connections and information, and the proprietor is able to narrow Halloran’s search to a single block. Later, children on a playground direct him to the proper building. This final sequence, like the film as a whole, uses the “humanized
voice of god” to move between street and aerial views to resolve the case and produce a unified, capacious, totalized city.

Throughout *Naked City*, the street is treated as a kind of lexicon, the repository of all facts and information. However, these facts cannot be transformed into artifacts, cannot be parsed or used to solve the crime until they are removed from the street and examined in the light of abstraction available in literal or figurative pyramids.26 Experiential space is always already the raw material of narrative. Although the Lower East Side yields up the murderer, he must be physically extracted from the mesh of the city’s routine before he can be apprehended (in both senses of the word). Thus, his capture and death occur halfway up the near tower of the Williamsburg Bridge in a sequence that provides a close approximation of the aerial shots that open the film. In the sequence’s final shot, the “street detail” of Garzah and the murder/disruption he represents appears in the foreground, isolated against the backdrop of the serial-centripetal view of the cityscape. Garzah falls to his death, leaving the serial-centripetal city behind him undisturbed.

*Naked City* thus produces a mode of abstract space that admits experiential space and links it to conceptual space. It does so, however, by placing experiential and conceptual space in a temporal and hierarchic relation to each other. Conceptual space pre-exists experiential space and provides the point of entry to and experience of the city; it creates a serial and centripetal representation of space. This concept thus frames the built environment and determines the ways in which it can be experienced. Descending to the street, information required to re-stabilize that concept may be acquired through an experience of space. Returning to a conceptual vantage, that information can be fit back into the serial-centripetal model, which also has the power to explain its significance. Thus, experiential space exists only to be read as a text and can only be decoded through the narrative matrix provided by conceptual space.
The film’s famous closing voiceover makes this apparent by reducing the diverse and divergent experiential space produced by murderer, victim, and investigator to a unified narrative: “There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them.” This voiceover accompanies an extreme long shot of Times Square in deep focus, paring the verbal gesture to the city’s huge, anonymous population with footage of the area that best approximates this particular figuration of serial-centripetal space. Moreover, the bottom of the frame features a tabloid headline about the case, literally performing the reduction of spatial practice to story. Even as the progress of the case sure-footedly followed Ariadne’s narrative thread through experiential space, the voiceover suggests that even those aspects of the city appearing in the film solely as extraneous or un-narrated experience themselves have a secret narrative life of their own and could just as easily have been told as Jean Dexter’s. Seriality incorporates even randomness, contingency, and coincidence.27

_Naked City_ demonstrates the capacity of serial-centripetal space and the dominance of narrative over experiential space so well because it is a detective story. Whether examined as a type of the Oedipus28 or as a strategy for negotiating urban modernity,29 narratologists often understand detective stories as a kind of metafiction whose subject is the construction of a narrative. That is, traditional detective fiction begins as the detective starts his inquiry into a crime that has already been committed. The story then told is perforce always already doubled as it relates the progress of the investigation and, in so doing, simultaneously (re)constructs the story of the crime. The end of the text is the point at which plot and story coincide, as the end of the investigation is also the solution of the crime – the text ends when the traversal of space has successfully been written as story. The primary components of narrative as such are time, space, and story. Usually, “story” or events in a casual chain must be contained and conveyed via space and time to be perceptible. In detective fiction, however, the twice-told nature of the tale allows for the self-sufficiency of story and the displacement/depen-
dency of the spatial and temporal aspects of the text, which always already signify story. As is perhaps not surprising for a genre so closely associated with urban modernity, detective fiction, like abstract space, finally reduces everything to the sign of a sign. These qualities suggest noir as a kind of cultural constellation that embodies and produces the dominant logic of abstract space in late modernity.

These qualities of detective fiction are heightened rather than ameliorated by *Naked City*’s adoption of city symphony elements. The film works hard to present “a day in the life” of New York. In fact, the sequence that immediately follows the aerial opening closely mimics the overture or waking section of *Berlin*. However, as Walter Benjamin points out, the more complex a city becomes, the more distance from the crowd a flâneur or detective in a city symphony or a noir requires to analyze it.30 *Naked City* both enacts and explicitly states this dictum. Hellinger’s voiceover consistently argues that the urban ensemble is a problem to be negotiated through the isolation of certain information as pertinent to a given situation. Surveying the assemblage of people and objects arrayed on the sidewalk across the street from the precinct, Hellinger intones, “Now a bright, hot light begins to shine.” It is a light of investigative storyweaving that picks out individuals and isolates them from the serial, centripetal rhythm. Thus, *Naked City*’s dual cinematographic strategies and voiceover consistently reify a concept of space and an experience of space, the pyramid and the labyrinth, as two mutually exclusive figures that cannot be viewed, understood, or occupied at the same time. The smooth functioning of urban rhythm, in fact, depends on the consistent transubstantiation of experience into concept, space into narrative.

*Naked City* and Dimendberg’s elaboration of the serial-centripetal model both demonstrate the ease with which late modern abstract space includes and tames experiential space and points out the complex relationship that exists between noir and the city symphony. While Dimendberg, Kozloff, and Gunning insist on the two traditions as intertexts, studies of cinema and the city have more commonly opposed the city
symphony to the film noir, considering each in terms of form and tone instead of in relation to the space produced by each. This opposition invokes the pyramid/labyrinth model and reifies their disconnection. James Donald’s *Imagining the Modern City* elaborates on this diptych, describing both genres as “mappings” of the city.\(^3\) The former maps the transparent “crystal city” whereas the latter traces the obscure “forbidden city.” Donald also likens the crystal city to a masterful, pyramidal vantage and the forbidden city to an earthy or subterranean labyrinth, in the process depoliticizing Tschumi’s binary by reducing it to qualities of genre. The two views are inversions of each other, with the former promising visual mastery and the latter unwillingly relating a “secret history” or privileged knowledge of criminality. Where the former holds out the city as a machine, the latter proclaims it an unsolvable enigma. *Naked City* demonstrates the error of this model because the detective’s movements compose a pyramid and the concatenating rhythms associated with the city symphony serve as a labyrinth. Thus, the fracturing of abstract space – especially in its serial-centripetal guise – does not depend simply on the exchange of the miniature for the gigantic, or on adopting a “labyrinthine” genre. Rather, the rupture of serial-centripetal space and production of differential space is contingent on undoing the city’s reduction to a text to be read. It demands a different relation between space and narrative: the structure of partiality, wherein experiential space itself produces a story of an alternate social ordering without being completely taken up and overwritten by conceptual space.

**Partiality: Spaces that Narrate**

Beginning with *Weegee’s*, the New York city symphonies derive their differential capacity through their figuration of partiality – by which I mean both incompleteness and an affinity for or toward. I define the concept of the partial/partiality as a narrative structuration of space reminiscent of Stewart’s gigantic or miniature. But where the gigantic and miniature are narratives – of historical forces and semiotic self-sufficiency,
respectively – generated by spatial objects, and Stewart’s other case studies of the souvenir and the collection investigate spaces and objects generated by narratives, the partial is the impossible point of overlap and origin for narrative and objects, signs and space. Stewart’s study, in fact, departs from the central political insight of formalist, psychoanalytic, and structuralist literary theory: that language is to experience as narrative is to its objects. Narrative is founded on an awareness of loss and is therefore a structure of desire that points to aspects or figurations of this incongruence, which is what exaggerations are. As Stewart concludes, exaggerations are finally an aspect of the capitalist apparatus that depends on the denial of the gap between language and experience, narrative and object – and, as I argue, sign and space – for its continuation. Exaggerations serve to normalize certain objects and narratives and rationalize and contain those produced as non-normative within the dominant linguistic structure of capitalist and (neo)imperialist societies.

Partiality, then, is functionally the opposite of exaggeration. If the purpose of exaggeration – and its implied norms – is to deny the unclosable gap between language and experience, then the partial, by staging and thus re-inscribing the disjunction between sign and space, figures the point at which narrative and space truly do intersect and which exaggeration/dominant narrative forms attempt to suppress: imperfection. Both space and story only exist to the extent that each is imperfect – literally, unfinished – and untotalized. One could not read a perfect story anymore than one could live in perfected space: that which is truly complete cannot be conceived or experienced because it is imperceptible. According to Lefebvre, space begins to exist only after a border, that is, a break in its continuity, is created. This is the first production of (representational) space. Just as Lefebvre argues that space is founded on the metaphoric relation of the body to its environment and the arbitrary territories founded on natural space, structuralist and post-structural theorists define narrative by its inscription of difference. This “difference” can
either refer to the operations within the diegesis that separate the beginning of the text from its end or to the break between the narrative and the world.\textsuperscript{33}

That is, both narrative and space are generated by the very gap each seeks to deny, but can never entirely suppress. This is why differential space is not dependent on marginality and subculture, which are spaces of difference or what Stewart would describe as exaggerations. I also argue that this is why Lefebvre aligns differential space with representational space – not simply because representational space has largely been effaced in favor of representations of space within the abstract space of modernity, but because if the mechanism of abstract space is based in signs, then so is its downfall. Partiality, which figures the unfigurable shared origin of narrative and space, is a way of structuring differential space because it produces spaces that narrate and constructs a story at odds with the one in which abstract space is embedded and propagates. As a narrative anti-exaggeration, partiality ensures through its grotesque form that the “part” never enters into a proportionate, metonymic relation with an implied or figured “whole” and instead acts as a critique of the notion of a totalized or unified urban space. \textit{Naked City} and the serial-centripetal logic of late modernity in general consistently deny the gap between narrative and space by suggesting that narrative is the precondition and perfection of space. At the same time, they recapitulate the sundering of pyramid and labyrinth, concept and experience, producing abstract space.

By drawing on a structure of partiality, \textit{Weegee’s New York} constructs multiple spatial practices, stages the co-extension of space and narrative, re-links conceptual and experiential space, and produces differential space. If \textit{Naked City} depends on Ariadne’s thread, then \textit{Weegee’s} enacts the construction of a labyrinth in which the walker can never be lost. Spatial practices create both labyrinths and paths through them as they go. The trick of partiality is to allow such experiential space to transcend itself as differential space. Partiality connects the itinerary/thread of spatial practice to both the logic that currently circumscribes potential paths and suggests what alternate representations of
space the path itself might generate.\textsuperscript{34} Partiality stages the tortured relationship between space and narrative and thereby suggests a different relation between the two.

**Cut-Rate Paradise**

The conflict between serial-centripetal logic and partiality may be illustrated by the juxtaposition of *Naked City’s* and *Weegee’s* respective first-run exhibitions. The films premiered within a week of each other in venues located less than two miles apart. *Naked City* screened at The Capitol, a commercial theater located at the north end of Times Square. The film’s audience – constituted as an anonymous crowd or mass of ticket stubs by *Naked City’s* narrative, the space of a hulking theater stripped of its palace-pretensions, and an anxious commercial film industry – exited the theater and more or less entered the last shot of the film, and what it held out as the apotheosis of serial-centripetal space. In the same paragraph that records *Naked City’s* extremely successful opening, the March 11, 1948 “Of Local Origin” column in *The New York Times* notes that Cinema 16 (which had for two years been charging single-admission for its programs at Greenwich Village’s Provincetown Playhouse) would now become “The Cinema 16 Film Society, which will present to its members films that cannot be shown publically.”

The following weekend, the Society’s first membership program previewed at a Chelsea gallery, and concluded with the first screening of *Weegee’s*.\textsuperscript{35} Cinema 16’s new status as a subscription society in which national obscenity laws were circumvented enacted a conflict between local and central powers and uses of space.

In *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema*, Barbara Willensky argues that Cinema 16’s non-profit status, oppositional stance to commercial cinema, and politicized screenings and programs notes constituted it as a true alternative cultural space in relation to both Hollywood cinema and for-profit art houses.\textsuperscript{36} Such oppositional cultures and emphasis of local authority are also constitutive of differential space.\textsuperscript{37} The intimate, critical space of the theater was itself doubled by Vogel’s dialectic
programming drawn from the world over, placing the global within the local while connecting a (collective) experience and perception of space to a distinct and oppositional concept of space. Thus, Cinema 16 structured both the representational space of cinema and what Giuliana Bruno describes as the spatial practices of cinema-going to produce differential space.38 From its juxtaposition with The City to its role as keystone of the first subscription program, Weegee’s is deeply intertwined with Cinema 16’s role as differential space, a role extended and even transcended by its content and structure.

When Weegee’s previewed in March 1948 it may have run as long as an hour and seems to have lacked a fully developed Coney Island section.39 By the time it premiered opposite The City at Cinema 16 in June, Weegee’s ran a total of twenty minutes, divided into one section of eight minutes and one section of twelve minutes. Weegee’s contains two New Yorks, one a surreal evocation of the emotional lives of buildings and the other a realistically, if sometimes grotesquely, observed crowd of people on a small stretch of beach. Weegee’s, according to Scott MacDonald, is really two films edited together, one the first entry in the experimental branch of the New York city symphony (which would eventually include Francis Thompson’s 1957 N.Y.,N.Y. and Marie Menken’s 1964 GO!GO!GO!),40 and the other a continuation of the neighborhood documentary tradition begun by Rudy Burckhardt in 1940’s The Pursuit of Happiness.41 Weegee’s divides the city into built structures and citizens, overview and detail, and accentuates these differences of content with contrasting forms. Thus, Weegee’s begins to chip away at the induced unity of abstract space at a structural level. At the same time, both sections are comprised of experiential space. The film jettisons the serial-centripetal tactics of Naked City, where experiential space is always already conceived in terms of its signifying capacity and grist for the narrative mill. Neither section has the status of “artifact,” acting as explanation or abstraction of the “facts” of the other. There is no drawing back to an artificially constructed pyramid from which the city may be read as a text. Instead,
remaining embedded in experiential space, *Weegee’s* partial structure stages spaces that narrate.

Symphonies like *Berlin* begin with the waking of the landscape and populace, generally depicting elements of the natural landscape being traversed by the clearly delineated lines of modern modes of transport. Their finales complete the rhyme of the opening by dissolving the natural landscape and the city that exists on/in it – as both built structure and populace – in an array of nighttime luminescence in the form of street lights, neon advertisements, and fireworks. In contrast, *Weegee’s* chronicle of a sleepless city first depicts a series of disembodied street lights that glow red over wavering headlights as they approach and disappear in the gloom of five a.m. From the very first shot, then, visibility is limited, and quotidian activities such as commuting and objects like street lamps are available only through implication.

This overture is followed by an extended shot of dawn breaking over a water tower. A skeletal tree sits atop the roof of a cast iron building in the garment district, and the Empire State Building is visible in the top corner frame right. The dawn’s complex coloration of the city is artificially preserved throughout the daytime sequence through the use of prisms, color filters, and wide-angle distortions of perspectival space. In *Naked City*, a figurative “bright light” shines on specific people and events, allowing for the production of narrative meaning. In *Weegee’s*, one of the film’s most stunning effects is the literal superimposition of a bright, colored light off-center in an otherwise black and white frame [figure A11]. This prism bathes random members of the crowd in a riot of iridescence, singling them out for the viewer’s attention. However, they do not take on additional or different significance. Rather, their movements draw attention to the variety of gaits, desires, goals, and rhythms at play in what is no longer a unified, serial crowd.

Furthermore, in what would traditionally be the opening construction of a panoramic view or impression of the city through montage, *Weegee’s* instead continually fragments such monumental sites as the Empire State Building by shooting them
obliquely. It evokes the city’s borders by shooting the Hudson from what is now the Chelsea Piers, rather than taking up a vantage outside the city in order to construct a panoramic skyline. The inversion of both the classical city symphony structure and the centripetal-serial logic of the textual city is completed by the final Times-Square-after-dark sequence. Rather than focus on illuminated signs and advertisements as a kind of modern monumental space, this sequence devotes the majority of its attention to the crowd that fills the area. It alternates long shots from a raised but not aerial vantage point that capture the westward progress of a mass of pedestrians as they cross Broadway with close-ups of individuals and time-lapsed images of taxis pulling up to the curb. The result is that the multiple uses to which the space is put at a given time of day by diverse populations – commuters returning home, drunks and prostitutes occupying their corners, theater goers seeking their seats – is evident; the space does not dissolve into the lighted advertisements that denote it as the sign of the city as text.

The second section, “Coney Island,” begins with a shot that almost exactly duplicates Weegee’s famous photograph Coney Island, 22nd of July 1940, 4 o’clock in the afternoon (1941), in which the slightly elevated vantage point and deep focus of the shot capture a large expanse of the beach, covered entirely by a vast crowd. Although the sheer mass of people and the over-exposure of the shot makes determining individuals difficult, there is still a directionality present; every member of the crowd directs his or her eyes toward Weegee, and many raise their arms above their heads, hands to their eyes to catch a glimpse of the camera that captures them. In the top left corner of the frame, the outline of Coney’s attractions are just visible – specifically Deno’s Wonder Wheel. The 150-foot high Ferris wheel has been in continuous operation since 1920 and promises riders a “matchless panoramic view of Lower Manhattan and the Atlantic Ocean.” Both Weegee’s photograph and Weegee’s invert this panorama by shooting from ground level and revaluing the gathered crowds as themselves the source of amusement and quotidian activity, relegating the lines of this monument to the
consumption of space and the panorama it composes to irrelevancy at the edge of the frame [figure A12]. *Weegee’s New York* not only sets this shot into motion, but it breaks the crowd down into continually recombining groups of individuals, couples, families, and communities. Like *Berlin*, this section claims to depict “a typical day,” but rather than implicitly arguing for the centrality and normality of wage-work in an industrialized setting and the daily schedule it creates, “Coney Island” creates a day that starts with arriving at one’s destination to get undressed around noon and ends with getting re-dressed to go home around 9 p.m. The section’s organization continues to dismantle the structure of the classic city symphony.

Within the borders of this re-arranged day, Weegee depicts the actions and inactions of a variety of people. He favors hand-held close-ups of a handful of sunbathers to whom he returns again and again throughout the day. Unlike the stately, disembodied and masterful camera shots that compose *Naked City*, Weegee is constantly challenged by his subjects – as with the slightly overweight pre-teen girl who abruptly sits up when she becomes aware of the camera, smoothes down the skirt of her bathing suit, and glares at the cinematographer until he moves off. At other moments, the camera is hailed by its subjects: a woman surrounded by her napping husband and child waves at the camera. In a striking shot, one of the longest in the section, a kissing couple is observed from mere inches away; their faces fill the frame. As Weegee’s shadow falls over them, the woman looks up at the camera, laughs, covers her face with her hands, looks away, spreads her fingers, looks back, looks away, drops her hands to her mouth, and looks up, holding the camera’s gaze [figure A13]. These studies of individuals are composed of quick, jerky cuts, but are constantly interrupted by more lyrical, medium and long shots of older people who generally remain unaware of the camera as they walk along the shoreline. These unmotivated changes in rhythm are familiar from the first section, but where their use in “New York Fantasy” produced immobile, monumental skyscrapers as a ride or
amusement, here they serve further to individuate members of the crowd and destabilize the already hazy temporal structure of this day “off.”

The section is given a vague shape by a dawn to dusk (or in this case, late morning to summer’s late sunset) structure. Like Berlin’s, the midpoint consists of successive lunches. But the space here cannot be metonymically composed and, because the beach cannot be segmented (the shots generally frame out both the ocean and the boardwalk), no one section of the beach can have a “proper” person or food associated with it. Rather, the emphasis is on the diversity of age, class, and ethnicity of the beach-goers and their proximity to one another.

After this sequence, the section turns to more studies of couples, only to have third parties consistently intervene. Initially, children interrupt their parents, then friends surprise and tease younger couples, then four successive shots capture different threesomes. This romance section is followed by a dance. The dance is populated by a loosely associated group of people who know each other and appear to have ethnic ties, as though an entire neighborhood has reproduced its social structure beyond the confines of its built environment. On another section of the beach, a gay male couple dance, undisturbed, with each other.

Naked City’s fetishized reduction of the city as a text to be read through the form of a (white) woman under threat cannot be easily reproduced here. Weegee’s does not produce “The City,” but rather a plethora of “cities” composed by a crowd that comports itself as a multitude instead of a mass. Each “city” has its own rhythm and each pursues different activities. The section’s final shots depict the setting sun, which renders swimmers indistinct from the water, silhouettes onlookers against the pier, and mingles the natural colors of the sky with the artificial red of the parachute jump. The day ends several times: people empty the area, a seagull chases the tide, the moon rises, and a single couple remains on the darkened beach.
Unlike so many of its contemporaries, *Weegee’s New York* turns neither to Greenwich Village nor to Harlem as the local embodiment of authenticity, deferment of capitalist organization of labor, or a pocket kept back from the society of the spectacle. Instead, the film turns to the paradigmatic space of consumption (center of production), Midtown, and a famous site of the consumption of space (leisure or vacation destination), Coney Island. The film does not only reverse their functions, but isolates, investigates, and parodies specific elements of each location, breaking down the signs associated with each and reconstituting both spaces as new “superior milieus.” Midtown and Coney are rendered opaque, a focus on rhythm, erotics and undecidable images replacing the dominant logic of instantly decodable, endlessly visually available, centralizing space. Thus, *Weegee’s New York* effects a détournement of the crucial late modern division of social space into places dominated by spaces of consumption and those produced in terms of the consumption of space. *Weegee’s* composes both places as experiential spaces that imply the accepted meaning and system of signification or conceptual space that underlies each by reversing it, producing differential space that narrates an alternate social order.

For example, in post-war New York Times Square functioned as a monumental center. It was (and is) dominated by several of the prime organs of specularization, the accumulation of capital to the point it becomes an image: print media and the representation of that media’s corporate incarnation as spectacle, tourism, theaters, and shopping. Such is its exact function at the conclusion of *Naked City*. As the last monumental space visited, it naturalizes the centripetal city as text and the serial-panoramic logic underlying this construction when it reduces the Dexter murder to a headline on a discarded tabloid. As the newspaper is swept up to make way for more news, all that remains are the disembodied lights of Times Square, too far away to be legible, but announcing in their brightness and centrality the strength of the centripetal movements that compose the city as text. By contrast, the “New York Fantasy” segment
of Weegee’s depicts the area as clearly being in use and being changed by that use, even as the bright lights are further distorted by time-lapse photography. This technique displaces their traditional function as sign of amusement and consumption and turns the luminescence of the signs themselves into an amusement or an attraction. The effect is a confusion between the surface of the street and the background of the billboards as – suspended on a blank background – the crowd appears to pulse and dance rather than trudge home.

The same effect turns a news ticker into an animated advertisement (that is, reveals its true nature) while a small, shabby shop selling “live turtles” disproportionately commands the camera’s attention. The totalizing, oblique, panoramic view is nowhere to be found; instead a sense of marginality, of smallness, and of strangeness emerges. What are we to make of this grubby doorway behind which “live turtles and cut rate souvenirs” can be acquired? The sign cannot perform the function of serial-centripetal logic: it organizes nothing, addresses no totalizing cliché, constructs no metonym. “Live turtles” is a somewhat unexpected sight, but its significance cannot be reduced to: “the urban ensemble is punctuated by inexplicable phenomena” as it would be in a text organized by seriality. Instead, it draws attention to the area as a space of consumption, but reveals the oddity – and leisure – at the heart of this space and its activities. The sign is more reminiscent of a carnival midway in some small town than it is of the “crossroads of the world.” Although this suggests a kind of displacement, the connotation of the carnival also gestures to extant contemporary discussions of “notoriously tawdry and honky-tonk Times Square.”

47 Weegee’s highlights the difference between the humble and local turtle ad and the overwhelming lights and ads for products with an international reach that define the space in which the souvenir shop exists and whose luminescence and movement recalls the fireworks and lights of a carnival. In doing so, “New York Fantasy” negotiates Times Square in terms of partiality and, through its co-extension of space and
narrative, produces differential space. The area’s main function, that of consumption, is obscured but not elided as its surreal, disorienting qualities come to the foreground.

Throughout “New York Fantasy,” the rhythm of editing between shots and of movement within shots is characterized by jarring and unmotivated changes that turn the act of negotiating a central space of production and spectacle into a spatial practice more reminiscent of an amusement park ride than the drudgery of commuting. Similar tactics even succeed in revaluing the visual, geometric, phallic paradigm of abstract space – the Empire State Building. Here, the modern skyscraper, which dominates and orients the perception and lived experience of space around it, is recast as a kind of urban rainbow, an insubstantial apparition glimpsed fleetingly between buildings. Seamless editing turns a vertical pan up the side of the building into a horizontal tracking shot of the underside of an overpass. The sequence continues with another attempt to complete the survey of the building; this time a pan down its side results in a dissolve of twenty blocks to the Rockefeller Center ice skating rink. Utilizing visual distortion and the re-articulation of disparate locations, the camera defies the regimentation of space, time, and rhythm that Midtown engenders and instead engages in an aimless drift that is defiant precisely because it is aimless and lacks the potential for conventional use or exchange value.

In the “Coney Island” section, a place where space itself is consumed as amusement is re-imagined to produce a plethora of new social forms, a democratic assemblage in the flesh that exists without the metaphoric intervention of monumentality. Amusement parks in general and Coney Island in particular were constitutive loci of urban modernity (and for the spread of modernity as mass culture beyond urban centers) and exaggerations of the cities to which they were attached.\textsuperscript{48} In popular cinema, Coney Island was both valorized as a place of total escape from the pressures of modern life and denigrated as a paradigm of the alienation and anonymity of mass culture from \textit{The Crowd} to \textit{On the Town} (Donen, 1949).\textsuperscript{49} Unlike similar spaces in \textit{Berlin}, places of leisure and amusement are not dependant on factory schedules and wages; the temporal
location of a summer weekend doubles and deepens the logic of leisure time, loosening its connection to the schedule of the working week and its regimented schedule. Rather than following Berlin’s atomization of family units on the basis of gender and age to different locations and forms of labor – father to the factory, children to school, mother to the domestic sphere – “Coney Island” details the interpenetration of the public and private spheres as family and other kinship groups stake out corners of the beach and join together for communal activities such as swimming and dancing. The central “lunch” sequence still acts as a pivot, but here the emphasis is on the diversity of food accumulated in one space and the function of that food as markers of class and ethnic identity reinforcing Coney Island’s post-war status as a “people’s beach.” It was open to and populated by the working class, people of color and/or recent immigrants, all of whom were excluded from Long Island’s Jones Beach and other locations only accessible by car and only welcoming to middle-class whites.

MacDonald lavishes critical attention on the “generous, unashamed” display of bodies in the Coney Island scenes but concludes that their importance is the subjects’ sincerity or innocence, which he takes as a marker of their historical distance from today’s body consciousness.50 However, a careful study of the scenes reveals that the actual display is not of the bodies themselves but of the camera’s voyeurism and its challenge by its object’s return of the gaze or of a body in the act of performing for it. The section begins by focusing on age-appropriate heterosexual pairings, who by turns ignore and address the camera and then begins to depict interracial, queer, and multiple partners, who repeat the same ignorance and awareness of the camera. This redefines private behavior as a legitimate part of the public sphere, points out the lack of private space, and reveals the oscillation between participatory performance and willful ignorance that characterizes daily life in an urban center. The sequence ends with the beachgoers re-assuming their clothing and other markers of gender and class position, perhaps preparing to take up their places in the serial-centripetal city. But the longest shot
in the sequence calls their very typicality into question: a young man stands in front of his girlfriend as she kneels on their blanket, re-applying her lipstick. As her guide, she uses the round hand mirror the man has tucked into the waistband of his swimsuit and which he frames with his hands as he alternately regards the camera and the woman. Rather than construct the city as text and concomitantly collect and personify it as fetishized body, this image captures and halts the process in the process of being constructed and reveals what has been normalized by the exaggeration of serial-centripetal space as itself an exaggeration. The sequence narrates a spatial practice while suggesting the logic and power relations that organize it and, in the exaggerated playfulness of the couple, the potential for challenging those relations.

The Coney Island of the immediate post-war era is an area usually narrated by serial-centripetal space as a heterotopia that relates to the center as a re-inscription of the abstracted crowd in the guise of leisure. In its first shot “Coney Island” gestures to this very narrative by seemingly collecting all of the million usual Sunday visitors in a single amalgam of limbs and heads. The section as a whole is dedicated to the fracturing of this narrative as myriad individual communities, kinship groups, and erotic relationships each activate, traverse, and experience the beach in their own ways. The performing bodies of “Coney Island” do more than bespeak a kind of physicality and naturalness, they narrate the city as an assemblage of humanity absent dominant rhythms of production and the built environment that sustains them. This New York of the flesh is a city that cannot be reduced to the concept of a container, and in it there is no pyramid or conceptual space to impose a story on experience. Rather, “Coney Island’s” partial structure allows for the narration of the city as a space organized by erotics in which public and private spaces and activities are unified, and where local authorities alone determine rhythms and relations. A narrative or concept of space arises from within an experience of space, resulting in the production of differential space.
While both “New York Fantasy” and “Coney Island” are comprised of experiential space and effect a détournement of their area’s usual functions to narrate a subversive possible social order, the sections cannot be reduced to the same narrative or concept of space. Unlike the aerial-street binary mediated and articulated by the detective process of *Naked City*’s narration, one cannot be transformed into the other; one does not “explain” the other. The disarticulation of space in the two sections of *Weegee’s New York* allows for the distortion inherent in the smooth proportionality of serial-centripetal abstract space to be glimpsed. Moreover, each space assumes a new status as both lived and logical space independent of the other, precisely what the narration of space – and the conditions of abstract space and modernity that narration reproduces – forbids in *Berlin, The City*, and *Naked City*.

**Being Together with Strangers**

*Weegee’s* focus on Midtown and Coney Island is perhaps most important because it allows the film to suggest a mode of urban cohabitation that is not tied to the idea of “community.” Dimendberg argues that serial-centripetal narratives easily co-opt community by exclusively relating it to areas like Greenwich Village, which exist as repositories of “facts” and are positioned as nonynchronous spaces not quite included in modernity. This is how the Lower East Side functions in *Naked City*. Moreover, the concept of “community” in general often evolves an exclusionary usage and tends to reduce the city to a series of “urban villages” that can only take action as limited neighborhood units inhabited by racially and socio-economically homogenous populations. In fact, for all its desire to produce an oppositional theatrical space, Cinema 16 itself, with its small, economically elevated and culturally elite audience, arguably illuminates community’s limitations. By contrast with the Greenwich Village theatre that exhibited Weegee’s “legendary impressions” of them, Midtown Manhattan and Coney Island are excluded from this definition of community because they are non-
residential areas with extremely large, diverse and transitory populations. But rather than simply inscribe them as hyper-modern, anonymous, centripetal spaces in opposition to some idealized urban village, *Weegee’s* allows these spaces to narrate a different mode of urban living: that of being together with strangers. Iris Marion Young defines “being together with strangers” as an experience of urban space that allows for tactical alliances, mutual support, and safety while preserving a certain degree of anonymity, plurality, and freedom of movement beyond the confines of communities. In such a constellation, Young argues, spatial politics no longer take the form of rhetoric but narrative, allowing for mutual comprehension of opposed positions without demanding capitulation to or acceptance of any of them. *Weegee’s* partiality narrates such a city in all its differential capacity.

The film’s partiality derives in large part from its direct engagement with and détournement of serial-centripetal space’s desire to map the entire urban ensemble. *Naked City* divides the city into street views and elevated views, fact and artifact, the better to produce a concrete representation and unified, totalized view. *Weegee’s* seemingly divides the city into disparate modes of perception – impressionistic and documentary – and then refuses to unify these modes, instead further multiplying them into myriad spatial practices. Although both Beattie and MacDonald position *Weegee’s* as the progenitor of the New York city symphony cycle as a whole, it is the only film in the cycle to include both observational documentary techniques and avant-garde techniques aligned with abstract representation. It is also the only film to depict both an urban overview (in “Fantasy”) and an examination of a single area (in “Coney”).

Later films in the cycle retain *Weegee’s* differential capacity and are clearly indebted in their adoption of either the tactics of “New York Fantasy” or of “Coney Island.” These films also use a structure of partiality to produce differential space, but do so by traversing only one of several other complementary types of locations composed by serial-centripetal logic, specifically the minatorial and the monumental. By and large, the
rest of the films in the cycle narrate one of two spatial practices. The descendents of “New York Fantasy” use similar optical special effects to survey a wide range of phenomena and monumental structures dominating the city’s geographic and economic centers. The successors of “Coney Island” draw on observational documentary techniques to chronicle a single, marginal area often produced as threatening (minatorial) by dominant representations of space. These films are organized as a series of portraits of inhabitants and eschew sustained study of the built environment.

Weegee’s thus produces differential space structured by partiality as an aesthetic text in relation to its exhibition context and as the foundational text in a filmic cycle. In doing so, the film narrates an alternate social order, serves as the constitutive event for the crafting of an oppositional representational space, and suggests that cinematics spatial practices not only encompass individual texts but also produce varied and contradictory itineraries between texts. In its own way, Weegee’s collects and organizes as many concepts, perceptions, and experiences of space as Naked City does. But where Naked City builds an abstract serial-centripetal pyramid through the narration of space, Weegee’s paces out a differential labyrinth produced by multivalent – sometimes mutually constitutive, sometimes mutually exclusive – spaces that narrate.
Notes

1 The film premiered at Cinema 16 in June 1948. This silent, twenty-minute film is the version that circulated widely in the mid-century film society network and at various retrospectives through the early 1990s. In 1955 Vogel added a soundtrack, which is present on the International Center for Photography’s print. This print is available for rental and is the one to which most film scholars – including myself – have access. Because this soundtrack was added by Vogel five years after the film premiered and appears not to have been present on prints of the film screened in various retrospectives from the 1970s to the 1990s, I do not discuss it. For an evaluation of the soundtrack and its impact on later independent American films, see MacDonald, Garden, 162. Prior to its premiere, Amos Vogel began offering public previews of Weegee’s in March 1948. At this point, the film was silent, lacked scenes set on Coney Island, and was nearly thirty minutes longer. A few early notices refer to this longer version.

2 MacDonald, Garden, 160-61.


4 Scott MacDonald, Cinema 16: Documents Toward a History of the Society (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 10. Cinema 16 was one of the primary exhibitors of both New York city symphonies and their European predecessors in the United States during the mid-century. Films of the original cycle are often articulated in terms of montage, whether as evidence for the mode’s critical failure and shallowness (Berlin) or as exemplars of the vertovian constructivist kino-eye (Man With a Movie Camera). Vogel’s programming tactics suggest that, at least for post-war American audiences and possibly for the Cinema 16 habitués who directed several of the New York films, the relationship of the city symphony with kino-fist must be considered.

5 Lefebvre, 392.

6 MacDonald, Cinema 16, 263.

7 ibid, 103. Of course, as The City was only nine years old at the time, its own status as a “classic” both speaks to Cinema 16’s pretensions as a canon maker and to its comparison with the very new Weegee’s.

8 Wojtowicz, 118-122.


10 Alexander, 222.

11 Anthony Flint notes the title of the project as This Urgent Need and, while intimating that it was never exhibited, describes Moses’s plans to screen it during his presentations to community boards and the city council. Anthony Flint, Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took on New York’s Master Builder and Transformed the American City (New York: Random House, 2009), 219-220.
12 MacDonald, Garden, 262.
13 Dimendberg, 12-18.
14 ibid, 60.
15 ibid, 22-24.
16 ibid, 14-17.
19 Dimendberg, 17, 121. The City’s fear of urban complexity is also consonant with anxieties underpinning much of the action in noir.
20 This is ironic, given that the film is directed by the photographer whose most famous book (Weegee’s 1944 complication of crime scene photographs, Naked City) gave Dassin’s Naked City its name in the first place.
21 Dimendberg, 64-65.
22 ibid, 68.
23 ibid, 43.
24 ibid, 45-46.
25 ibid, 14-15, 128.
26 The fact-artifact binary comes from Rick Altman’s argument for this kind of character-author narration as a marker of single-focus narrative, which includes detective fiction. Rick Altman, A Theory of Narrative (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 162-70.
27 Dimendberg notes that Weegee’s photographs of crime scenes – which leant their collection’s name to Dassin’s film – often draw on exactly these qualities, 76-77.
30 Benjamin, 166.
31 Donald, 63-95.
32 Stewart, ix.


34 Louis Marin suggests that utopian texts produce a similar relationship. They always enact the transposition of experience into text as travel narratives, but their processes continually gesture to the gaps and impossibilities that such transformations normally gloss over. Louis Marin, “Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present,” *Critical Inquiry* 19.3 (Spring 1993): 397-420.


36 Willensky, 130-31.

37 Lefebvre, 379.


40 *GO!GO!GO!*, 16mm, dir. Marie Menken (New York: Filmmakers Cooperative Distribution Center, 1964).

41 MacDonald, “City As Country,” 7-16.

42 Dimendberg argues that *Naked City* and other contemporary commercial films continually do this, 68-72.

43 MacDonald, *Garden*, 162.

44 The Deno’s website reproduces and quotes from the original promotional materials, which they claim have not been altered for the 90 years of the Wheel’s operation. http://www.wonderwheel.com/ (Accessed 2/26/2011). It is worth noting that the sight omitted from the panorama is that of Brooklyn and even Coney Island itself; the immediate environs necessarily rendered invisible in the construction of the all-seeing (centripetal, monumental) panorama.

45 Dimendberg, 92-99; Sanders, 187-208.

46 Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, “Methods of Détournement,” *Les Lèvres Nues* 6 (September 1955). Reprinted in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berekely, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 8-14. Détournement is a tactic developed to effect a reappropriation of text and space by the avant-garde Lettrist group as it was evolving into the more politically engaged and radical Situationist International
in France in the mid-late 1950s. In 1956, just three months after Weegee’s returned to Cinema 16, Situationist founder Guy Debord and Lettrist Guy Wolman described détournement as a response that irrationally engages the common significance of signs and spaces. This response twists, complicates or subverts these milieu, often by the introduction or combination of disparate texts or styles. This détourning of pre-existing aesthetic elements results in the “superior construction of a milieu.”

47 White, 154-55.


50 MacDonald, Garden, 162.


52 Donald, 164-70.

53 Willensky, 131.


CHAPTER IV
PRESS HERE FOR SECRET PASSAGE:
ASYNCHRONOUS TIME, MARGINAL
SUBJECTIVITY, AND MINATORIAL SPACE

Those who go there do not send back dispatches.
Elmer Bendiner, The Bowery Man

_Weegee’s New York_ narrated Coney Island as a space capable of assembling the city’s entire population. “Coney Island” produced that population as sharing the spatial experience and political relation of “being together with strangers,” overturning serial-centripetal logic’s division of space into anonymous hypermodernity and pre-modern community. By contrast, several other city symphonies that deal with a single location produce differential space from a specific neighborhood characterized by a limited and racially or socio-economically homogenous population. These symphonies consist of Weegee’s own _Feast of San Gennaro_ (1948), Helen Levitt and James Agee’s _In the Street_ (1948), Rudy Burckhardt’s _Under Brooklyn Bridge_ (1953), and Lionel Rogosin’s _On the Bowery_ (1957).¹ The films chronicle the daily spatial practices that compose Little Italy, East Harlem, Fulton’s Landing, and The Bowery, respectively. These documentary-based texts are city symphonies in the “Coney Island” tradition, single-location city symphonies producing differential space by excluding the space of consumption from their visual economy and focusing exclusively on marginal areas/spaces of difference. By implying the effect the dominant space of consumption has on these areas, thematizing performance and storytelling as urban spatial practices, and depicting marginal subjectivities and their attendant perceptions of space/representational spaces, these films produce as differential space areas that abstract space continually narrates as spaces of difference. These films, which exclusively depict limited, unified,
and marginal areas, while eschewing complex montage in favor of more straightforward documentary tactics, have always fit somewhat awkwardly into the city symphony canon. The classic definition of city symphonies, as codified by Grierson, Kracauer, and MacDonald, place the films in a liminal position, bridging the distance between documentary and avant-garde forms. But while city symphonies have always included fictional content – the suicide in Berlin, the murder in Alberto Cavalcanti’s Rien que les heures (1926), or the motivating plot in René Clair’s Paris qui dort (1925) – critical discussion of the form insists not only on their non-fictional but also their non-narrative aspects. This artificially constructed litmus has two consequences. The first is that analyses of city symphonies consistently conflate narrative with fiction, ignoring the narrative capacity of space itself and the haptic qualities of cinema. The second is that films deviating from the proscribed structure of the classic city symphony either in terms of minimization of concatenating effect or maximization of fiction, no matter their duplication of or direct challenge to the city symphony’s function, are only haphazardly read in terms of the form.

For example, Helen Levitt and James Agee’s documentary of East Harlem, In the Street, has generally been described as a city film or city symphony although it lacks the familiar dawn-dusk structure and any attempt at a representation of spatially diverse, simultaneous phenomena. Although it spurns the identifying marks of the European city symphony, In the Street has nevertheless been analyzed and indeed marketed as a crucial entry in the form. For example, as one of the most popular films of Cinema 16’s 1953-54 season, In the Street was shown alongside Ian Hugo’s Bells of Atlantis (1954), Paris qui dort, and Nigel McIsaac’s The Singing Street (1951). These films were respectively described in the program notes as an avant-garde New York city symphony, a European city symphony, and a Scottish newsreel concerning daily life in Edinburgh. In a manner similar to Amos Vogel’s programming philosophy with regard to Weegee’s New York, In the Street’s initial exhibition produced close associations and critical comparisons
between it and the emerging canon of city symphonies. When Cinema 16 member Siegfried Kracauer discusses *In the Street* in *Theory of Film*, he places the film in the company of *Berlin, Rain*, and the post-war Swedish city symphonies of Arne Sucksdorff. In 1986, Scott MacDonald reinscribed this taxonomy by programming *In the Street* at Greenwich Village’s Film Forum – a nonprofit, membership-based theater that might be considered one of Cinema 16’s spiritual successors – alongside Stan Brakhage’s *Wonder Ring* (1955) and Georges Franju’s *Sang des bêtes* (1949). Brakhage’s film is a canonic New York cycle experimental film and Franju’s is sometimes discussed as a Parisian city symphony of the margins. The association between *In the Street* and the city symphony tradition has become so well established that Tom Gunning recently invoked the film as a core example of the city symphony form as itself a self-evident claim.

By contrast, Lionel Rogosin’s documentary of the southeastern Manhattan neighborhood known as The Bowery, *On the Bowery*, is aligned with New American Cinema but not the New York city symphonies. Despite its exclusion from the canon, *Bowery* makes use of a dawn-dusk structure, is explicitly dedicated to the evocation of quotidian routine, and attempts to suggest a spatio-temporal relation between various neighborhood occurrences. More important than the vagaries of canon building are the assumptions that have been made about the nature of the space such single-location films produce. This is particularly evident in discussions of Rudy Burckhardt’s studies of various neighborhoods, especially *Under Brooklyn Bridge*’s Fulton Landing. Burckhardt’s films are repeatedly described as being more natural, authentic, and democratic representations of New York than their experimental counterparts. Such analysis reinscribes the totalizing gaze of serial-centripetal space and naturalizes the function ascribed to areas of racial or socio-economic difference by this regime. The conflation of such spaces of difference with pre-modernity, a loss of masterful vision,
authenticity, and a limited version of community directly reproduces the function these areas serve in late modern abstract space.

These films all critique, subvert, or revalue the function of the margins in serial-centripetal space. Given the characteristics of the space that dominates and creates the relations of production in late modernity – serial-centripetal logic that composes a city as a text – the differential space of every New York city symphony is structured through partiality and foregrounds space as it is experienced rather than conceived. However, differential space also displays variances within a given epoch, changing its form according to the spaces it engages so that it may preserve its function. That is, a city symphony like Weegee’s – which undoes the totalizing logic of the city by depicting multiple kinds of spaces and/or using multiple styles – necessarily employs a very different form than a film that aspires to the same project by depicting a single, marginal area using only one style. That style is determined in response to late modernity’s dominant serial-centripetal logic, which produces the margins as spaces of difference and pre-modern temporality through urban planning, the concurrent ejection of such areas from the city as iconic-text, and the complementary figuration of the margins as a dangerous, illegible maze.

The Monster at the End of This City

The form single-location city symphonies take is responsive to the stories told about marginal areas by serial-centripetal space through urban planning, zoning laws, and the kind of clichéd panoramic views Dimendberg describes in connection with Naked City.10 Naked City demonstrates that the serial-centripetal regime narrated such areas as a threatening, inarticulate maze. This maze always signifies experiential urban space as a problem to be solved from conceptual space. That is, this narration of the margins transformed the labyrinth of experiential space into a literal maze, reducing a quality innate to all social space to metaphoric signs that (pejoratively) named or defined given
locales. In addition, because serial-centripetal logic articulated the urban margin as being out of joint – according it the status of a pre-modern anachronism – with the hyper-modern center, experiential space could be temporalized, associated solely with a past that must be / already has been transcended. This naturalization of the labyrinth-pyramid division was continually reinscribed by dominant representations of space governmental and cultural, ranging from urban renewal projects to aerial photography. That is, areas of racial and/or socio-economic difference were literally hidden from view by the “visual cliché” Dimendberg argues aerial photographs collectively produce and, moreover, by large-scale planning projects like expressways, bridges, and high-rise public housing – the self-same projects that often ruptured the identity, internal connections, and spatial practices of such areas.  

The neighborhoods at the center of *Feast, Street, Bridge, and Bowery* were each subject to representations of space that erased them from the iconic view produced by serial-centripetal space, separated them from spaces of consumption, and constrained the spatial practices of inhabitants. For example, East Harlem was a primary site for the implementation of multiple high-rise housing projects in the early 1940s. Beginning in the late 1930s, as the population began to tip from Italian-Americans to Puerto Ricans, the neighborhood’s surface streets were increasingly bypassed by non-residents in favor of the Robert Moses-designed FDR Drive (1934), the East Harlem River Drive (1940), and the TriBoro Bridge complex (1937). As infrastructure rendered the area increasingly invisible, its role in the urban imaginary as an incomprehensible, violent area grew, advanced by the Harlem Riot of 1943.  

At the same time, the late modern city’s turn toward a service economy exiled manufacturing and heavy industry to marginal areas – even as the traditional trades and sources of employment in such areas began to diminish. Thus, Fulton’s Landing, a neighborhood organized around the piers directly under the Brooklyn Bridge, began to lose commercial renters, union enrollment, and local jobs. For its part, Little Italy’s
population dispersed to outerborough enclaves or inner-ring suburbs, even as its power in the city council and Democratic party politics waned. Finally, The Bowery, after a long history as a periodically explosive mixture of criminal gangs, theatres, Tammany soldiers, and waves of immigrants “became drunk and prim and quiet. Its senescence seems to be sealed.” Little Italy, East Harlem, Fulton’s Landing, and The Bowery function as a kind of double labyrinth within the spatial order composed by late modern abstract space. They both signify the pre-modern, un-narratable and illogical status of experiential space and are hidden from the sight of serial-centripetal space – which of course re-inscribes their pre-modern and illegible status.

In “Watching Your Step,” Chris Jenks argues that such doubly invisible/unintelligible – or doubly labyrinthine – spaces take on a distinctly threatening identity within abstract space that turns on this same lack of accessibility to visual surveillance and knowledge. Jenks characterizes such spaces as “minatorial” sites that challenge a visitor’s negotiation of space. Minatorial space also forbids the flâneur and/or detective’s ability to narrate or conceptualize their own practices or the practices of locals. The area’s resistance to being read helps naturalize its residents as being pre-modern and dangerous – an identity of course tied to racial or economic difference. The idea of a location as minatorial re-inscribes the concept of space as a problem of legibility. In this case it produces the margins as spaces of difference, narrated as mazes that must be solved in order to go elsewhere. Minorial space is populated by a vulnerable stranger possessed of a distanced gaze (or a gaze originating from elsewhere) and monsters – racial or socio-economic others – adept at spatial practices but lacking speech. That is, such spaces are intelligible only in terms of specialized local argot, informally erected but stringently enforced borders, and bodily behaviors, all of which occur “below the threshold of vision” and seemingly exceed explanatory capacity: “certain streets or patches of ground provoke a malevolence which generally seems to be quite without motive.” As Jenks notes, the concept of a monstrous, alternative
organization of space is always already conceived from *outside* that space and narrates economic disadvantage and intra-ethnic or racial ties as illegible threat. In these ways serial-centripetal space arranges for the narration even of that which it produces as un-narratable – which is to say, a space of difference that cannot give an account of itself but must be accounted for. Minatorial space re-inscribes the dominance of representations of space over spatial practices and aligns narrative solely with conceptual space. It naturalizes the marginal status of certain areas by insisting on their asynchronous relation to modernity, resistance to visualization, and inherent danger. Single-location city symphonies exchange the figure of the monster at the end of the urban book for that of the interleaved, infinite city. Films like *Feast, Street, Bridge,* and *Bowery* produce an urban space best described as fractal, as containing infinite experiences and relations within a very limited area.

Such a sense of space might be best encapsulated by the photographs of Helen Levitt, which feature many of the same spaces as the above films. Levitt’s 1936-43 series of portraits of children and street life – collected in her first solo show at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) under the title “Photographs of Children” – went on to inspire *In the Street,* which she co-directed. One of the most famous MOMA show photographs is “Untitled.” Featuring only a scrap of grated doorway on the left side that exhibits scale and texture contrast, the photograph consists of an East Harlem stone wall on which the words “Button to Secret Passage: Press” are chalked next to a dot placed within two concentric circles [*figure A14*].

Levitt’s photograph, lacking a title as well as any visual contextualization and framed so tightly that it omits the street beyond it, paradoxically suggests a limitless expanse of space and multiple temporal registers – another world folded, accordion-like, into the very fabric of the mundane stone façade of the street, a city bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. Thus, this photograph redefines a space of difference as differential space through a structure of partiality. The normal hegemonic relation
between sign and place is overthrown, with the conceptual significance of the architecture – the sturdy, forbidding ugliness of stone blocks that conjure institutions in a residential structure, the ineffectual, fearful division between public and private communicated by the wire mesh – subverted by the whimsical chalk message’s communication. The entire dominant signage of the edifice speaks of forcible exclusion; the message imagines an impossible invitation. Like Levitt’s photographs, single-location city symphonies produce differential space through their construction of “secret passages” that fragment, invert, and multiply the given meanings and functions possible in a single space.

The secret passages or differential space narrated by single-location city symphonies are calibrated to subvert the concept of minatorial space and are produced in several ways. First, the vision of an outsider that composes minatorial space is exchanged for that of an insider through the repeated use of point of view shots. Second, the “illegibility” of behavior and gesture is contested by the contextualization of body language and peculiarities of speech as elements of self-conscious performance. Performativity elucidates the theme of the city as theatre. Third, the over-determined identification of spaces of difference with a kind of suspended pre-modernity is exploded by the foregrounding of exceptional events coupled with the composition of multiple asynchronous rhythms. These films re-link experiential space to conceptual space through the intervention of representational space. Lefebvre often identifies representational space with subversive activities, local spaces in conflict with the center, and the staging of drama or poetry. However, representational spaces may also refer to festivals or the suspension of the normal relations of production.16 *Feast, Street, Bridge,* and *Bowery* concern representational space in both senses. The films respectively chronicle a saint’s day, Halloween, summer vacation, and a lost weekend. Such representational space narrates minatorial space as a series of experiential secret passages
through serial-centripetal modernity that relate to abstract space temporally by periodically erupting into it.

*Feast of San Gennaro: A Saint in the City*

*Feast of San Gennaro*, which details the well-attended Saint’s Feast held yearly in Little Italy, deals with an area less geographically and socially marginal than its fellow single-location symphonies. The film’s subject, in fact, is the ability of a marker of ethnic and neighborhood difference that disrupts the usual borders between public and private space, as well as commerce and leisure, to produce the area as a kind of transient center. It is ironic that a film directed by a celebrity of a well-known event should be reduced to such total historical and material marginality. (*Feast* is almost unknown and is rarely discussed in the critical literature on city symphonies or independent film because it exists today only as a single reel of fragile, slowly warping 16mm celluloid housed with the Amos Vogel Papers in the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.) Over the course of fourteen minutes, in black and white and color, this reel unspools the September 1947 celebration of San Gennaro on Mulberry Street.

Early notices and reviews of *Weegee’s New York* and MacDonald’s description of the film’s very long post-production provide some hints as to *Feast of San Gennaro*’s identity and original function. MacDonald claims that Weegee began shooting raw footage of various city scenes toward the end of 1945, and continued through the winter of 1947. Before *Weegee’s* assumed its final form, an early review of the film suggests that preview versions exhibited at photography and art galleries lacked a Coney Island section and yet had a much longer run time than the final twenty-minute version. Given these facts and Vogel’s control over the footage in the editing stage, it is likely that *Feast of San Gennaro* was part of an early, expanded version of *Weegee’s* later cut from the exhibition print. Moreover, *Feast* shares many of the themes clarified by “Coney Island.” These include the swallowing of the built environment, the excessive quality of the
crowd, and a focus on democratic activity. *Feast’s* emphasis on the exceptional time of the festival in combination with these qualities produces a story of a marginal area acting as a momentary civic center in the act of modifying its usual characteristics. In doing so, *Feast* demonstrates how a structure of partiality can re-link experiential and conceptual space when it revalues a minatorial space of difference as differential space.

In *Feast*, the built environment of New York’s Little Italy neighborhood recedes from view, disappearing first under the bodies of the assembled crowd and their attendant parade paraphernalia in the day’s heat and later emerging as structuring absence, legible only as the dark space visible between and outlined by the lights hung for the celebration to continue into the evening. *Feast* alternates between an analysis of the rhythms of the crowd as a whole shot from overhead vantage points and brief portraits of individual objects and attendees shot at street level, often with the subject directly returning the camera’s look. These portraits often lead to reverse shots or even small sequences implied as originating from a celebrant’s point of view.

The film draws particular attention to the sheer scale of the crowd and its outsized relation to the narrow streets and relatively small scale of residential and commercial architecture in the area. Although the film is silent, the day section emphasizes the various speeches being given from raised platforms on street corners, featuring multiple cut-ins to the mouths and gestures of speakers and audience members. The evening section builds on this sense of the area’s spilling its borders, with the brightly colored bunting now illuminated by lights arcing across the street and reflected on the pavement. The motion of the lights produces a sense of uncontainable exuberance, even as the obscuring of the built environment in shadow allows for foregrounding the celebration itself as occupying its own time and producing its own space. At the same time, *Feast* makes no attempt to survey or connect the disparate spaces that make up “the city” as a whole, and neither does it motivate its abrupt switch from documentary to experimental style through a change of location. Perhaps more important, it makes no claims at all to
represent a “typical day,” as even Weegee’s does in its intertitles, but rather insists on the space it produces being determined by a specific and exceptional temporal measure.

The first ten of Feast’s fourteen minutes chronicle the daylight hours of the celebration and depict the inhabitants gathering on corners and sidewalks to observe speakers, floats, and other entertainments. The film’s final minutes depict the festivities continuing into the night with the aid of artificial illumination or, as nothing other than the illuminated bulbs on trees and the garlands that stretch across the street are visible, the finale produces the movement of the lights themselves as a celebration. In this way, the film’s structure undoes the panoramic aspects of the classical city symphonies. By disentangling these two techniques, San Gennaro consistently defamiliarizes the built environment, simultaneously refusing the kind of visual mastery that makes space legible as text and revaluing an intimate residential neighborhood of five square blocks, in which no structure tops six stories, as both a central district teeming with crowds of pedestrians and an infinite expanse of color, light, and movement equal to Times Square. The result is a portrait of a somewhat marginal and disreputable neighborhood taken at the moment it is functioning as the civic center, inhabited and negotiated by a series of bodies – including bodies engaged in the political action of a local candidate’s rally – that are irreducible to a single body politic.

This fracturing of serial-centripetal abstract space is evident not only in the film’s formal conventions, but in its very subject, particularly as regards the issue of legibility. In a totalized panoramic view of New York – such as the one opening Naked City – Little Italy is completely elided, registering only as an absence of verticality, as a pause between the towers of the financial district and the towers of Midtown and, as such, spatially lags behind modernity itself. Little Italy cannot be figured as a monument addressed to everyone and no one, but exists rather as a minatorial series of local exchanges, activities, and relations of production that are literally invisible to outsiders. Feast refutes the label of minatorial space and the serial-centripetal system of which it is
a part. Instead of setting Little Italy against the real or transparent modern world, the action is closely restricted to a single intersection in the heart of the area. Rather than rendering the vision of a threatening / threatened outside observer, the camera approximates the spatial practices of a local. In opposition to space’s general reduction to sign – or the specific construction of the inability to render space as sign figured by the minotaur – a small expanse of intersection takes on a variety of meanings throughout the day, from parade of mythic figures, to political center, to pleasure district.

This is why the final minutes and especially the last shots of Feast, which appear to mimic the vision of someone laying on their back on the sidewalk as he or she squints upwards toward a vanishing point, are so extraordinary. The reassuring or menacing “human” scale of the neighborhood is re-imagined as a series of bleeding, blinding lights that first suggest some sense of perspectival distance, only to fill the screen so that the electric offerings of a single block seem to extend into infinity. The buildings themselves become a series of vertiginous angles, released from their moorings, swaying like the lights and, like them, lack any sense of an end. The once dwarfed, drab intersection of Mulberry and Water Streets has suddenly taken on the disorienting, sublime nature of the deepest urban canyons; the margins have become the center even as the extreme impressionism of the sequence implies the area’s inhabitants’ own experience and perception of space.

Not only does the film produce a re-centering of marginal space, it also depicts the irruption of the time and logic of the festival into the modern city. Little Italy may be always already out of joint with its hypermodern surroundings, but the tradition of the San Gennaro parade on the Saint’s Feast Day of September 19 complicates this temporal relation. First, as the Feast itself celebrates the patron saint of Naples, the city from which a large contingent of the neighborhood originated, the festival comprises an “alternative cartography” that re-links the narrow passages of Mulberry, Grand, and Hester streets with the grand avenues in Naples’s center, where a San Gennaro parade also occurs every
year on September 19. Susan Stewart argues that such parades and festivals – especially when featuring representations of a quasi-mythic founder or patron, as San Gennaro does – layer a cyclic sense of history over its normal linear progression. Moreover, such processions function as a public spectacle and originate a new and momentary public sphere, aligning individual subjectivity with a communitarian perception. Mulberry Street’s San Gennaro began in 1926 when the owners of four local coffee houses strung colored lights across the street and between their businesses, offered their wares on the street, and collected contributions for the area’s needy. Feast’s focus on the overflow of attendees and the increasing blending of sidewalk and street – and of both with theater, given the number of public attractions and the attractions of the public – gestures to the confusion of public and private space, residential and commercial sites, on which the festival was founded and which it re-produces every year, even to the present day. The origins of the parade also complicate the generic identity of “Little Italy” by revealing the area’s specific links to a particular cultural and spatially distinct Italian city. San Gennaro itself thus functions as a representational space that can easily succeed to a differential capacity. The film allows experiential space to narrate alternative concepts of space, producing differential space.

*In the Street: The Quotidian as Performance*

Like *San Gennaro*, *In the Street* centers on a festival – in this case, Halloween – and its narration of “secret passages” through the totalizing logic of serial-centripetal space. *San Gennaro* chronicles a festival specific to and in some sense constitutive of Little Italy as a representational space. The performance of this festival re-locates the urban center to the margins and disrupts its usual ordering of time and spatial practices. *In the Street*, by contrast, devotes a great deal of its attention to the celebration of a national holiday. The film fixes its sights squarely on the tenement and brownstone-lined streets of East Harlem – simultaneously crowded with eyes surveying the commerce and
play of the street from front windows and stoops and punctuated by wide, empty stretches of sidewalk and trash-strewn desolate lots. While *Feast* effectively relocates the urban population and power centers to a marginal space, Levitt’s film studiously eschews such events, sites, and tactics.

In *In the Street*, the city symphony’s typical unifying structure of the composite day is jettisoned. Even the connective tissue of mass transportation, which at once can serve as an organization of spatial practices and as a schematic travel narrative, is elided, with elevated trains passing just out of sight beyond the top of the frame. Instead, the film consists of three loosely defined sections. The first concentrates on intertwined scenes of intergenerational play and care enacted on sidewalks and stoops. The second chronicles Halloween activities, and the third depicts children’s sustained interaction with the camera in a vacant lot. There is neither a sense of the progression of a constructed “day” in the action nor even a clear differentiation between a time of work and a time of leisure. Even the seasons are disarticulated, with the first section featuring footage of late fall and summer, the second limited to a precise date, and the third indistinct. In fact, in his revaluation of the film as a marriage of pre-war social documentary and post-war surrealist experimental film, Juan Antonio Suárez Sánchez argues that *Street*’s minimal structure is limited to groupings of contrasting motion and congruent objects, emerging only “after several careful viewings.”

Sánchez’s evaluation, however, ignores the dominant theme of urban life as theater, which both marks Levitt’s work as a whole and is explicitly articulated at the film’s outset. *In the Street* begins with an oft-quoted epigraph written by James Agee, which appears as white words over a black screen: “The streets of the poor quarters of the great cities are, above all, a theater and a battleground. There, unaware and unnoticed, every human being is a poet, a masker, a warrior, a dancer: and in his innocent artistry he projects, against the turmoil of the street, an image of human existence. The attempt in this short film is to capture the image.” This language is consonant with Lefebvre’s
description of theaters as representational spaces that fragment abstract space through the
development of local authorities, language systems, and rhythms. Agee’s epigraph
suggests not only that the street may be *transformed* into a theater, as it is in *Feast*, but
that the street is always already a theater and a battleground. At first glance, a theater and
a battlefield are opposed spaces, a difference not due to the nature of the activities they
compose but to the participatory status of the inhabitants. Theater turns on the distinction
between stage and pit, activity occurring on the former and observation in the latter,
which preserves the reality of that observation and those making it, as well as the
fictional status of the staged activity.

In a battle, by contrast, there is no off-stage space, or perhaps there is no stage:
everything that happens occupies the same level of reality and has no boundary between
itself and the rest of the world. However, literary and traditional historiographic accounts
of battles often frame the “action” of the battle as though it were a play, a metaphor made
easier by real occupation of the audience’s position by generals and kings (who, in pre-
modern historiography, could also be considered playwrights). Theater, for its part, has
consistently tested the tensile strength of the fourth wall, extending the diegetic action out
into the edges of the auditorium in *Theater of Cruelty* even as it brings the audience onto
the stage in *Theater of the Oppressed*. That is, Agee’s first sentence conjures theater
and battlefield as representational spaces and, by forcefully conjoining them, foregrounds
the potential of each as differential space. More important, by arguing that the street itself –
which, in late modernity, consists of spatial practices circumscribed by the dominant
panoramic representation of space – *is* both theater and battlefield, Agee suggests a
structure of partiality in which space and narrative are co-extensive.

Agee’s epigraph has been read as a kind of encapsulation of Helen Levitt’s
photographic work and philosophy. In her analysis of Levitt’s depiction of children and
the city, Ellen Handy claims, “Levitt’s is an exclusively human conception of the city;
that is, she presents the city as a collection of people and experiences rather than as a
location on a map or a mass of structures and buildings. In Levitt’s New York, there is no Statue of Liberty, no Empire State Building, and no Central Park.”28 Levitt’s work as a whole, then, is also consonant with single-location New York city symphonies in its eschewal of monumental space and concurrent focus on the rhythmic aspects of lived experience at street level. The majority of her photography in the 1940s attended to the performative aspects of urban life, particularly as they relate to the behaviors of children in marginal areas. As Handy demonstrates in her analysis of Levitt’s subjects and methods, the photographer’s “transparency of style” belied her complex approach to people and their environment. For Levitt, the subject of her apparently unstaged photographs – Handy claims that her work never betrays a sense that her control has been imposed on the shoot – was always the present tense and largely invisible intertwining of identity and environment through play. Levitt conceives of everyday urban life in terms of “childhood as performance, city as theater.”29 While this description initially seems reminiscent of the “space as container” model so crucial to the reproduction of abstract space, Handy’s articulation of Levitt’s theory and practice makes it clear that the “theater and performance” metaphor should be considered not as a binary, but as the “archive and repertoire” dyad of performance studies, where the space of the performances and stories framed by the architecture of the theater are mutually constitutive.30 Agee’s encapsulation of this philosophy in the preface to In the Street not only elucidates this model of street life as one characterized by ambiguity, multiple rhythms and uses, and the heteroglossic accumulation of meaning, but also reshapes the theatrical metaphor, articulating it to fit the cinematic apparatus.

This cinematic translation begins with Agee’s description of the human being/performer projecting the image of his/her existence “against the turmoil of the street.” In the Street was roughly contemporary with – and was explicitly discussed in – major works of realist film theory, most notably Kracauer’s Theory of Film.31 Kracauer understands the urban street as a subject particularly well suited to cinema but not
because the speed and complexity of urban life can only be expressed through the universal language of silent montage – as proponents of the 1920s city symphonies argued. Rather, Kracauer argues that the urban ensemble always already engages the “sleuthing” capacity of observers and inhabitants while suggesting “the flow of life.” Cinema’s recording and revelatory capacity allows for the preservation, display, and critique of these qualities. Agee goes a step farther than Kracauer, however, and suggests that the border whose dissolution André Bazin points to as the horizon of cinematic possibility has already been breached; that the street is always already the screen. For Agee, the urban dweller, often situated as the subject produced, addressed, or approximated by film, becomes the projector that stores and unspools the footage of the citizen’s existence (as is proper for a metaphor of the cinematic apparatus, the projector and the camera overlap). That existence is projected back into the “turmoil of the street” that shaped and produced it in the first place, now become both source and screen.

Between the doubled reflection of street and citizen, screen and projector, In the Street “captures the image [of human existence]” while structurally occupying the place of the audience – the same audience that stores and projects the image of human existence captured by the film. The boundaries between theater and battleground vanish, as do those between screen and street, acting and recording. The city and the cinema become a continuous loop of representational space. Moreover, because Agee establishes the normative state of human existence as that of a poet, masker, warrior, or dancer, it becomes possible to read spatial practices as narrational practices.

In the Street’s first image produces what Dimendberg suggests is the narrative of late modernity as such – the juxtaposition of disparate temporalities within the urban palimpsest – through the mobile long take of the street that centers on the contrasting motion of a cart horse and a bike rider. The conjoining of past and present is complicated by the next paired images, which measure time in terms of human lifespan and bonds as opposed to technologies of labor and transport. These medium shots feature
the sidewalk in front of a brownstone stoop, where older women sit, chatting. From the bottom left of the frame, a toddler flails toward the women – his arms outspread. One of the women rises, duplicates the boy’s pose, and sweeps toward him. In two successive shots, two middle-aged women greet each other the same way, and young girls playing with a baby carriage face mothers pushing their own carriages. These images of gender performance and caretaking are encapsulated and perhaps parodied by a shot of cats cleaning each other in a store window where generational difference, reproduction, and mimicry are resolved in a relation of equality.

The next series of shots begin to destabilize this preview of an orderly, heteronormative definition of “play” and instead demonstrate the ways in which play both challenges the extant order and begins to create variable identities and modes of interacting with the built environment. In one of the longer motionless shots of the film, a boy and a girl of about four utilize a single doorway in their play, transforming it into ground to be held, a stage on which to act out a romance, and a bulwark in exhaustion, as they intermittently fight, hug, and sob. Other shots of the street depict similar play, including activities that redefine or contest space: boys unlock a fire hydrant and leap over the resulting flow intercut with a woman sweeping the sidewalk. The next shot reframes the entire expanse of the street: a woman leans out of a window at the right top of the frame and the woman on the corner to whom she is speaking occupies the lower left edge of the frame. At once, the street is established as a bounded, policed territory with ragged demarcations of interior and exterior, even as the understanding of play/performance extends to include quotidian conversation.

The next section, the Halloween sequence, is probably the most famous and, as Sanchez asserts, the only sustained narrative material in the entire film. It follows children through the preparation, execution, and exhaustion of holiday activity. However, it is not clearly demarcated from the prior sequence and does not begin with children. The time of the everyday and the time of prescribed play bleed into each other through a shot
in which a woman dawdling in front of the stairs to the El while she ostentatiously dons a fur coat and chewing gum is supplanted by shots of a little boy with a cape, girls watching from windows, pirates and pilgrims walking past corners. Rather than conveying a sense of headlong abandon or speed through editing, the sequence constructs a series of portraits, beginning with a carefully composed medium-long shot of old women waiting on a front stoop. The objects of their anticipation are disclosed in the next portraits of boys eating candy, applying their costumes, and filling stockings with flour [figure A15]. The camera jolts into motion as the boys – now joined by neighborhood girls of the same age – divide up the lot behind the row houses into staging areas of stocking filling and candy deposit and then flow out onto the street, dodging past adults, avoiding a well-dressed man on the sidewalk, and then dropping into a scuffle behind him.

The increased fluidity and speed of the camerawork comes to rest on a pirate directly addressing the camera in the film’s first close up. The pause is doubled as, on the sidewalk, adults traversing the space force a suspension of play. In the next four shots, brawlers are separated, crying children are picked up by older siblings, others are cleared off stoops, and teenagers step tentatively into the street to begin dates, reinforcing the idea that “official” playtime is at an end. By contrast, engagement with the camera as an object of play increases as it pans a row of little girls waving at the camera in a vacant lot. In a fluid cut, the girls form a line in front of the camera and then successively step in front of the first girl, coming closer to the camera each time, which finally cuts into a series of masks. In the next shot, a boy watches the camera while eating popcorn as though at a movie. In the final shot, two women in black, like ghosts or nuns, regard the camera, turn their backs, and walk up the curve of a hill that suggests a studio set. This ending recapitulates the city-cinema loop produced by the epigraph, as direct address – which is generally associated with early cinema, challenges to the conventions of
ethnography, and verité provocations – meets the evocation of location shooting, and the location being shot, as simply another kind of set.

*In the Street* produces differential space though a structure that directly addresses the mutual constitution of space and narrative. The film does this by positing the co-extension of cinema and city, and of performance and document. *In the Street* works as a city symphony by unifying or gathering the disparate components of urban space – representations of space, representational spaces, and spatial practices – within a single area whose multiple daily rhythms cannot be narrated by the microcosmic exaggeration that characterizes *Berlin* and *The City*. These textual operations ensure that a racially and economically marginal area is produced as the center and sole setting of action. Rather than define East Harlem as a kind of pre-modern and/or minatorial space of difference, the film demonstrates the ways in which performance as a spatial practice infiltrates all aspects of daily life – not simply on Halloween. *Street* also demonstrates ways that urban performances can be used to contest or multiply the dominant conception of space that gives rise to and limits daily experiences of space. *In the Street’s* display of “play” repeatedly ruptures categories that separate such activities from the quotidian. It also exchanges the control exuded by unseen socio-economic centers of midtown and lower Manhattan for the daily flow of life in an area that is ripped from its artificial moorings as a spatial problem and reconstituted as a series of spatial practices. The film produces the city-cinema as rife with “secret passages” composed by theatrical spatial practices. These passages suggest that alternate concepts of space are immanent to the dominant serial-centripetal representation of space and the non-narratable minatorial status it accords places like East Harlem.

The Urban Swimming Hole: *Under Brooklyn Bridge*

Rudy Burckhardt’s *Under Brooklyn Bridge* also engages with differential space’s immanent quality, albeit in a more literal fashion. *Feast* and *Street* imply the space of
consumption and the urban center by depicting their effects, which often register as absence (of building height or public transport, for example). Burckhardt’s film, by contrast, is structured by the center’s proximal location to and production of marginality. *Bridge* depicts daily life in Fulton’s Landing, the neighborhood located at the outerborough terminus of the Brooklyn Bridge. Therefore, the film’s secret passages are temporal, and concern the daily rhythms of an area that supposedly has no rhythm of its own, serving only as a link between center and periphery. The first images suggest the way in which Fulton’s Landing is dominated by the river that defines it, but build in an undulating rhythm that suggests a watery movement extends to the built environment itself. The opening shot tracks across a series of doorways, windows, facades of empty factories, and uneven cobblestones that describe the texture of Brooklyn’s Old Fulton Street and Water Street as they converge at the edge of the East River. The camera moves ever downward, exaggerating the actual slope of the street. The shot ends at the water, and the second begins, reversing the downward movement of the first shot, seeming to almost float away from the ground to conclude the sequence with three panoramic shots of the tower on the Brooklyn side and then the span of the Bridge itself.

Over the course of fifteen minutes, the film chronicles the daily activities in Fulton’s Landing, a district defined by the monumental structure of the bridges that would inspire the neighborhood’s later re-naming as DUMBO (down under Manhattan Bridge overpass). The day continues with the demolition of a nearby vacant factory, which transitions into the lunch break of the construction workers responsible for knocking it down. The afternoon is characterized by leisure activities, specifically those of young boys who alternately swim in the river and parade in front of the camera. The day and film conclude with the trek homeward of Manhattan office workers, who stream back across the Bridge and into the homes chronicled in the film’s opening. The last shots confirm the completion of the commute by concentrating on the sleeping, deserted
Brooklyn streets and the dark shape of the Bridge, illuminated by the lights of Lower Manhattan in the background.

The smallness, marginality, and inability of this area to stand for the whole of the city is consistently emphasized both through the outsized shadow of the Bridge – which intrudes into, and often dominates, every shot – and the larger scale and lights of Manhattan visible in the distance. The space the film depicts is not only bordered and defined by the temporal progression of a “typical” day but by the rhythms and centripetal force of the space (Manhattan) that remains always just visible in the background of the shot and implied by the nature of the shot’s contents. Although the space of Fulton’s Landing functions as a center in that it fills every frame and comprises nearly the totality of the film, it is also always already marginal in that experiences, perceptions, and conceptions of it are determined by a space largely held off-screen. Indeed, even the formal diversity, mass culture, and centrality of the crowd in modernity is held at bay as an area best known for the monument that encompasses all these qualities instead comes to the fore as a mixed-use residential and commercial neighborhood.

Such montage as exists in the film is evident in the superimposition of two disparate perceptions and experiences of space within the same frame, in such a way that the relation between margin and center is inverted. Rather than the logic of juxtaposition that formed the microcosm of Berlin, and which Michel Foucault argues composes the dominant conception of modern space as such, Under Brooklyn Bridge excavates the workings of a long-ignored space not to further atomize it but to discover the flow of life that constitutes an experience of it.37 Most notably, the connection of the empty factory’s destruction and the unstructured leisure time that follows hints at the area’s loss of local jobs and industry. This lends the asynchrony of the sunbathing boys a more ominous undertone of future enforced leisure through unemployment. Brooklyn Bridge insists that a monumental and liminal structure paradigmatic of late modern abstract space’s serial-centripetal logic actually engenders alternate itineraries and spatial practices in its
immediate sphere. A structure conceptualized solely as an anonymous rhythm setter or visual metonym for the city as a whole instead narrates the quotidian experiences that occur in its shadow. This is the very space erased or rendered invisible by the Bridge’s conceptual or semiotic reduction to a structure for moving people between and reifying the hegemonic relation of center to periphery.

*On the Bowery: Eddies in the Urban River*

Like Burckhardt’s film, Lionel Rogosin’s *On the Bowery* is visually dominated by a monumental structure devoted to transportation. Just as Fulton’s Landing is marked by the eastern tower of the Bridge, the Bowery near Houston Street is cast into perpetual shadow by the pylons, platforms, and trains of the El [figure A16]. However, where Fulton’s Landing is simply displaced or hidden from serial-centripetal space by the form and function of Brooklyn Bridge, the Bowery exists within this regime as a minatorial space characterized by its popular status as “the end of the line.” Similarly, the minatorial qualities – invisible, un-narratable, and threatening – accorded to the Bowery are produced somewhat differently than those of East Harlem, Little Italy, or Fulton’s Landing. As a space of racial and economic difference, East Harlem was cut off from and made invisible to the rest of the city through a mixture of housing projects and beltways. Fulton’s Landing was characterized by industrial and manufacturing work that relates to serial-centripetal modernity as a kind of temporal lag or gap, just as the commercial-residential enclave of Little Italy is encoded as a kind of anachronistic connection to village life.

The minatorial and asynchronous functions of the above spaces are produced and defined by late modernity as serial-centripetal space that includes both visual clichés and urban planning. If the other minatorial spaces suggest time out of joint, a kind of break in urban rhythm, then the Bowery denotes the cessation of rhythm and movement all together. If East Harlem and Little Italy are threatening because they produce
inaccessible languages and racial or ethnic others, then the Bowery is frightening because it appears to snuff out the possibility of space’s signifying capacity entirely, along with any identity for its residents. The Bowery is both unknown to itself and unknowable. Elmer Bendiner’s introduction to his historical and sociological survey of the area, *The Bowery Man*, begins by noting: “those who go there do not send back dispatches.”

Several chapters later, he offers an explanation for this silence and unintelligibility: “The Bowery offers a hiding place so secret that the fugitive can not be found even by himself.”

*On the Bowery* produces this area as differential space largely by elucidating the various and complex rhythms that exist within it, contesting its status as a kind of unspeakable, unknowable urban dead end or paralysis. It simultaneously allows for the self-narration of marginal subjects, who articulate their own understanding of their surroundings, the behavioral and economic tactics that render the surroundings inhabitable, and the relation of those surroundings to the urban center and the wider world. *Feast, Street, and Bridge* turn on the production of representational spaces that fracture abstract space and re-link space as an experience to space as a concept by thematizing performance and the theatrical qualities of urban space. *Bowery* investigates the relation between spatial practices and representational space by introducing an individuated protagonist and a near deadline-narrative structure to the symphonic framework.

*Bowery*, like *Weegee’s*, narrates a series of urban days, each of which displays the familiar dawn-dusk structure while concatenating spatially diverse phenomena. Throughout those days, however, the film follows and is shaped by the activities of a single character, Ray (Ray Sayler), a railroad worker who has come to the Bowery to spend his pay and seek out adventure and companionship. *Bowery* deviates from the symphony tradition in that it focuses tightly on a lone individual to illuminate and
comment on the practices of the crowd. Furthermore, by scripting the role of Ray – a composite of several Bowery inhabitants – the film arguably enters the realm of fiction.

The film should be understood as a New York city symphony, however, because it produces differential space through a structure of partiality that figures the “secret passages” of a single location through documentary technique and a fictional depiction of an asynchronous subjectivity and its attendant perception of space. *On the Bowery* mixes documentary footage of the Bowery – including extended interviews with residents, recordings of the preceding at soup kitchens, and the dialogue among regulars at the area’s bars – with the fictional story of Ray. At the beginning of the film, Ray arrives in the Bowery because he has taken a leave from his job to spend his summer bonus. Throughout the course of *Bowery*’s hour-long running time, Ray integrates himself into the daily routine of the area’s indigents and drunks, even as he loses his possessions, clothes, and money, while the film concurrently accumulates information about the area and its inhabitants through location shooting and documentary content. The film ends with Ray’s departure, back to his “real life” and simultaneously away from the real lives that irrupt into – and help form – the diegesis.

In his discussion of the film, Kracauer describes the documentary aspects of *Bowery* as filaments attracted to the magnetism of its fictional core.41 It is more accurate, however, to invoke Bazin’s image of wet stones and a rushing river. In his review of the neorealist work *Paisà* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946), Bazin describes the film’s elliptical plot as stones strewn amid the course of the recording of a natural setting and events, which he imagines as a river.42 The viewer is not led by the hand along a sturdy path, but rather must constantly negotiate the treacherous limits of spectacle and event, story and actuality. More important, traveling this route is not a matter of keeping one’s feet dry – that is, of taking up and articulating natural settings and events (or space) exclusively in terms of their narrative qualities. Rather, the one gives rise to the other in a mutually
constitutive relationship, much as I have argued city symphonies develop space and narrative as co-extensive elements.

In the case of *On the Bowery*, the documentary and fictive aspects of the text combine to create multiple rhythms, so that the Bowery is produced as an experiential space in both cyclic and linear terms. This is particularly important given the dominant representation of space that figures the area as a minatorial place of stasis and finality – it is the city’s lowest ebb, and therefore has no spatial practices of its own or differences within itself. In his 1948 essay “Here Is New York,” E.B. White describes the area around the intersections of Houston Street, Bowery Street, and Second Avenue as the end of the line for those who have fallen out of the safe matrix of large social units and small neighborhoods he describes elsewhere.\(^{43}\) The metaphor has an instant kind of literalism to it as well, as Second Avenue and Houston represent the easternmost limits of today’s subways and yesterday’s elevated trains in Lower Manhattan. As minatorial space, the Bowery draws the limits of known environs, existing only as a threatening space of difference in the representations of space that compose abstract space. It “means” only edge, lack, loss, and danger. From the very first, however, *On the Bowery* revalues this space of difference as a differential space by trading the mapping of marginal space for the play of rhythm. Lacking all voiceover narration, the film begins with a series of tracking shots that trace the landscape at street level in wide expanses of sidewalk, pedestrians, and traffic. In both these images and the group of closer-framed, still shots that follow, the camera’s attention is continually drawn to the incongruent, unstable tableaux formed by bustling commuters as they brush past the motionless or slowly ambulating forms of the Bowery’s drunks and indigents, who are pushed off into gutters and doorways. The street truly does “flow,” as a complex stream of current and eddies, crowd and miscreants.

The static conceptual space of the Bowery is instantaneously picked apart and fractures further under the weight of a juxtaposed past and present with the image of
horse and man drawn carts competing for space with cars. More important, the border that Foucault considers basic to modern spatial order – the one between private and public – vanishes with repeated takes of the Bowery denizens making their homes on park benches and under the El.\textsuperscript{44} Fiction enters the frame in the form of Ray, the protagonist. The hierarchy between fiction and documentary, however, is more complex than Kracauer suggested. Rather than be introduced with a close up, Ray emerges from an extreme long shot of anonymous crowd making its way down from the steps of the El. As the shot switches to Ray’s point of view, it captures the police loading drunks into the paddywagon under the trestle. That is, the entrance of the character coincides with the unwilling exit of the real people he typifies, even as the shot both suggests that character’s likely future and a dominant but usually invisible daily rhythm in the area. Fiction here both normalizes and interrogates deviant space and social groupings.

Like a traditional city symphony, this overture – which previews the entirety of the action – is followed by a first act. Ray makes his way into The Round House, a bar and grill that serves railroad workers. The first urban day passes with an image track closely correlated with Ray’s point of view – and thus limited to the bar – and a soundtrack that encompasses the city’s exterior spaces. Throughout this section, time is implied with lengthy dissolves accompanied by sound bridges, so that the film’s accumulation of incongruous rhythms is maintained. The section ends with the joining of body and environment as Ray, following the advice of Round House regular Doc, sells his clothes to a flophouse concierge in return for a room. The first day ends abruptly with a black out. The second day begins with a high-angle shot of Ray waking on the street, the room for which he paid never glimpsed, no explanation for his location ever offered. However, even though his economic situation has changed markedly, the evocation of “morning” in cinematography and editing follows the exact same pattern as the previous day, placing Ray both in and out of synchronization with the area’s dominant rhythm. This second day deals with the other institutions that dominate the district – the church
and the soup kitchen. The sequence set in these areas largely consists of a sermon given to the men as a prerequisite for their meal, which encapsulates the area’s function as a minatorial space: “There isn’t a man here who started out to end up on the Bowery – the saddest, maddest street. A tragic street.” Here, the very location of the men serves as their sole identity and defines that identity as a negative. One can only “end up” on the Bowery, it cannot serve as a place of origins or spatial practices.

However, this reinscription of the Bowery as a concept, drawn from a documentary source, is challenged by the most obviously stylized point-of-view shot in the film. In it, Ray regards the prison-like silhouette of the bars that divide the soup line from the sleeping area being cast on the reclining men. The cinematography articulates Ray’s perception of space, transforming the location of charity into the location of punishment – which is to say, speaks its significance – and relinks the terminus of the Bowery with the centers of production elsewhere in the city that help determine its sad, mad qualities in the first place. The scene abruptly cuts back to the Round House, with Ray and Doc discussing their life’s stories, spelling out the narrative elided by the soup kitchen’s rhetoric and continuing the connection of the isolated space of the Bowery with the rest of the city – and even the nation as a whole. This diachronic life’s story is intercut with a couple of friends at the bar who, like Samuel Beckett’s tramps in Waiting for Godot, encapsulate their entire long relationship through a few vague references to “do you remember” and a never-ending complaining narration about each other’s actions in the current moment. Doc and Ray roll out their life for display like a long tapestry even as other lives are bounded by the way one man flicks a peanut shell at another. The second set of men, of course, also represent a possible future for the fictional protagonist, even as they also manifestly occupy a documentary present.

The next morning, Ray awakens in an alley after having been mugged in a sequence intercut with Doc waking in the flophouse; the Bowery, too, has degrees of difference and multiple spatial practices. The final sequence of the film begins with a
gesture toward community, as Ray shares breakfast and schnapps on the sidewalk with other locals. Simultaneously, Doc uses his own long history as a Bowery resident – that is, his failure in the context of a larger society – as social currency to secure the return of Ray’s belongings, which he in turn sells for more than they are worth. As Doc approaches Ray with the money, Ray recounts the film’s narrative in voiceover, using a third person omniscient mode to describe his own experiences. Rogosin here employs the form of an expository documentary to re-narrate Ray’s fictional experiences as though they happened to someone other than the character, as if Ray speaks for and through the collection of real people who have actually had similar experiences. Doc eventually hands the money over to Ray with a command that conflates representations of space and spatial practices: “get off the Bowery and stay off.” The film ends in the same spot it began – Ray looks at passersby as he stands at the steps to the El. As he watches, the expected shot reverse shot fails. Instead, the camera moves behind him to assume his point of view as Doc, in voiceover, describes the lives of local residents. Thus, the “terminal” aspects of the Bowery are complicated through repetition, the creation of something like a communal point of view or shared vantage point. The more or less linear and fictional movements of Ray are contained within the documentary and cyclic activities of the area – both of which are bonded to the traditional dawn-dusk structure of the city symphony.

The Bowery strains the limits of serial-centripetal space’s exclusive connection of experiential space with the minatorial space of the margins. Here, in this most labyrinthine of all city spaces – a maze so complete it is as impenetrable to the inhabitant as to the observer – the panoramic city as text reasserts itself. The Bowery, by forbidding all spatial practices, can finally only be articulated as a cohesive, totalized image in which the whole is more important than any given part, exactly as *Naked City*’s aerial panorama produced the serial-centripetal late modern city as a text. Inarticulate, invisible, unmappable, immobile, this most minatorial of spaces is finally only conceivable through
visual metaphors and an exterior vantage point. Thus, *On the Bowery* cannot emphasize the representational spaces of the festival or the city as theater as *Feast* and *Street* do. Instead, *On the Bowery*’s use of extended point of view shots and collective voice over place the film inside the perception of residents. This forces the static, unified image of the area composed by abstract space to fracture. The film breaks the Bowery open and traces its secret passages, not laying it bare for analysis yet insisting on its navigability. In this instance, the very act of depicting the Bowery as an experiential space capable of organizing perceptions of space is sufficient to narrate an alternate social order and produce differential space.

**At the Island’s Limits**

In his evaluation of *In the Street*, Kracauer first describes the film as “reportage pure and simple,” before amending his analysis to account for the film’s emotional quality and specifically the camera’s engagement with its subjects: “the camera dwells on them tenderly; they are not meant to stand for anything but themselves.”45 Here, a certain kind of subjectivity or bias on the part of cinema paradoxically reveals the true nature of the object observed, devoid of induced or external signifiers. This description is both typical of Kracauer’s understanding of cinema’s best potential and function in late modern, post-war society and resonant with Lefebvre’s account of differential space, as well as my own articulation of partiality.

Although this chapter concerns the most formally diverse body of texts considered in this project, Kracauer’s description is applicable to each film. They combine reportage and emotion, which can be understood both as the mingling of documentary and fiction in the case of *On the Bowery*, and as the redefinition of the quotidian as performance in *In the Street*. Thus, these single-location symphonies re-value areas relegated to the status of spaces of difference by the serial-centripetal logic of abstract space. In discovering the “secret passages” of varied, plural, and irreducible
spatial practices that structure these areas, *Feast of San Gennaro* narrates a marginal neighborhood as a periodic center, *In the Street* narrates the city as the theater, *Under Brooklyn Bridge* narrates mass transportation as play, and *On the Bowery* narrates the maze as a community. In doing so, the films divorce the people of Little Italy, East Harlem, Fulton’s Landing, and The Bowery from their minatorial function as metaphor and metonymy so that they signify themselves while gesturing to the other roles they could assume in a different world, the unacknowledged roles they already served within their own communities, and the immanent relation those communities enjoy with the late modern center.
Notes

1 *Feast of San Gennaro*, 16mm, directed by Weegee (1948; Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research); *Under Brooklyn Bridge*, 16mm, directed by Rudy Burckhardt (New York: The Filmmakers’ Cooperative Distribution Center, 1953); *On the Bowery*, VHS, directed by Lionel Rogosin (1957; New York: Milestone Film & Video, 1995).

2 *Bells of Atlantis*, 16mm, directed by Ian Hugo (1954; New York; Anthology Film Archives, 1998); *The Singing Street*, m4v, directed by Nigel McIsaac (1951; Edinburgh: Scottish Screen Archive Online, 2008).

3 MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 197-98.

4 Kracauer, 273.

5 For the full citation of Brakhage’s film, see n1 chapter 5. *Sang des bêtes*, DVD, directed by Georges Franju (1949; New York: Criterion Collection, 2004).

6 MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, n35 p36.


10 Dimendberg, 65.


12 The Harlem Riot began to the west of East Harlem on August 1, in the heart of a historically black neighborhood, when a white police officer shot a black soldier. However, by the riot’s end on August 3, East Harlem was also affected, notably by damage to commercial spaces. Neighborhood strangulation by beltway was increasingly used to isolate working class or poor areas with high concentrations of black or latino residents throughout the 1950s in cities such as Newark, Philadelphia, and Detroit. Jacobs singled out East Harlem as a key example of these strategies’ negative impact on communities in *Death and Life*, 122-35.

14 This spelling of “Minotaur’s” adjectival form is original to Jenks’ article. Jenks, 155-60.

15 ibid, 157.

16 Lefebvre, 379-92.

17 The Center’s online catalog gives the film’s title as *Feast of San Gennaro* and notes the director as simply “Weegee.” No reference to this film exists in the International Center for Photography’s holdings of Weegee’s photographs, writings, and films. Vogel’s notes on his acquisitions, programming, and distribution for Cinema 16 are likewise silent.

18 This print is silent, and in very fragile condition. It is available for restricted viewing in the Wiscon archives under ArCat call number AC 291. RLIN: WHV04-F287.


20 Deschin, 17.

21 Weegee was in fact born and raised several blocks south-east of Mulberry street, in the Lower East Side.

22 Jenks, 144-45.

23 Stewart, 82-85.


25 Lefebvre, 392.


29 ibid, 206-13.

Theory of Film was published in 1960, twelve years after In the Street’s completion. As Miriam Hansen notes in her critical introduction to the book, Theory of Film was in dialogue with Kracauer’s theories and writings from the Weimar era. The book was also assembled during a lengthy period during and after World War Two, as Kracauer combed the archives at the Museum of Modern Art and screened many newer films exhibited in New York’s burgeoning art houses and film societies. Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Introduction,” in Theory of Film, Siegfried Kracauer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), vii – xlv. I argue that Kracauer’s status as a member of Cinema 16, his contribution to its program notes, and the overlap between Cinema 16’s programming and the post-war New York films treated extensively in Theory of Film suggests that some of his screening might have occurred at the Society as well.

Kracauer, 270-85.


Dimendberg, 3.


DUMBO encompasses the areas immediately adjacent to the Brooklyn termini of the twinned Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges; the acronym stands for “down under Manhattan Bridge overpass,” and its use dates from the 1970s. During the mid-century, the area was still known by its 19th-century name of Fulton’s Landing. While the heavy industry on the docks has all but disappeared, the neighborhood is still dominated by the waterfront in the form of recreational activities on Piers 1 and 6.


Bendiner, 1.

ibid, 97.

Sayler, a non-professional actor, is credited as “Himself” by the end titles. However, several accounts of the film, dating from Kracauer’s, stress that the film includes fictional and staged material. Bendiner notes that Sayler was not a Bowery resident or an alcoholic, 130-35. See also Lionel Rogosin, “Interpreting Reality: Notes on Improvisational Acting,” Film Culture 21 (Summer 1960): 20-28.

“Like a magnet, the film’s fictional core attracts its reportorial elements which group themselves accordingly,” Kracauer, 250.

“The mind has to leap from one event to another as one leaps from stone to stone in crossing a river,” André Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation” in What Is Cinema Vol. 2 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 35. Paisà, DVD, directed by Roberto Rossellini (1946; New

43 White, 161.

44 Foucault, 23.

45 Kracauer, 273.
CHAPTER V

“IF THEY EVER FINISH BUILDING IT”: MONUMENTS, RHYTHMANALYSIS, AND EXPERIMENTAL CITY SYMPHONIES

What is called for is a renewed urban society, a renovated centrality, leaving opportunities for rhythms and use of time that would permit full usage of moments and places. … Centrality of course does not imply the center of power but the regrouping of differences in relation to each other.

Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, “Lost in Transposition”

Architecture produces living bodies, each with its own distinct traits. The animating principle of such a body … reproduces itself within those who use the space in question, within their lived experience. Of that experience the tourist, the passive spectator, can grasp but a pale shadow.

Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space

In late modernity, the center is a text-product, a pyramid that lacks a place for spatial practices and the rhythms that structure them. Thus, whereas the symphonies of the margins use documentary techniques to contend with areas deliberately and thoroughly erased from the visual field of late modernity, the symphonies of the center use experimental techniques to engage with spaces so consistently and repetitively imaged that they have become utterly fused together. The experimental city symphonies – Jazz of Lights (Ian Hugo, 1954), Wonder Ring (Stan Brakhage and Joseph Cornell, 1955), N.Y., N.Y. (Francis Thompson, 1957), GO!GO!GO!, Lights (Marie Menken, 1962-64, 1964), Brussels Loops, Bridges-go-round, and Skyscraper (Shirley Clarke, 1957, 1958, 1959, respectively) – concentrate on various aspects of the built environment in the urban center.¹ These include Times Square, the Third Avenue Elevated Train, Pennsylvania and Grand Central Stations, Central Park, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Tishman Building, and the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree. Through handheld
camerawork, a refusal of panoramic logic, the construction of monuments as subjects, and the enframing of the city itself within the cinematic apparatus, the films continually suggest that they originate from and are oriented by the rhythms of particular bodies both human and architectural, continually grounding themselves in experiential space.

The experimental city symphonies bear out Giuliana Bruno’s argument that film acts as a kind of internal map or archive of (e)motion capable of tracing the rhythms and relations of bodies and environments, particularly those “felt in urban rhythm as random, cumulative assemblage mobilized in emotional traversal.” Moreover, while Bruno’s argument may be extended to serve as an ontological claim for cinema in general, she herself specifically connects it to “real stories of place” that figure the convergence of cinema and architecture – such as city symphonies. A “real story of place” inhabits and is inhabited by the built environment by putting it on: Bruno argues that to be habituated to a place, to live in it, is to wear it, like clothes or a second skin. As ciné-poetry films that often prominently featured gestural camerawork, experimental city symphonies were explicitly devised with the intent to perform this kind of dwelling (habitare) and wearing (abito), connecting the bodies and perceptions of their creators with the “bodies” of city and cinema themselves. Thus, these films undertake an analysis of the center in terms of its rhythms, narrating the soulless product of the serial-centripetal panoramic, touristic view as a complex assemblage of creative, monumental bodies engaged in spatial practices, equally comprised of flesh and marble, celluloid and concrete.

Experimental city symphonies thereby take up a space that has been reduced to a “congealed thing” – as Lefebvre refers to the urban center within abstract space – and disarticulate it, staging the rhythms composed by, with, and through the center’s built environment. They insist on the movements, differences, and experiences possible within the urban center: they narrate it as a work that engenders space – both that inside and outside the subject – instead of a product that circulates within it. The films capture and are captured by urban rhythms even without the overt inclusion of an individuated
protagonist or a group neighborhood portrait in large part because they narrate the center as a group of monuments, which themselves constitute exactly this kind of relationship as representational spaces.

While monuments testify to the oppressive power of nation and the accumulation of centralized capital on which they depend, they also always convey more than their explicit or intended meaning. As representational spaces, monuments exceed the capacity of signification and language, producing what Lefebvre refers to as “a horizon of meaning” rather than any one representation of space. Even as historical traces of the conditions necessary to produce hegemonic abstract space, they retain traces of absolute space and thus exist as slight anachronisms. This function is especially so in late modern New York, which Dimendberg argues turned on the omnipresence of layered temporalities and nonsynchronous spaces that overlapped with and sometimes commented on each other. Rather than the soliloquy of rational-comprehensive planning, a monument always engages in a dialogue between public and private space, assumes the differential capacity of theatrical or poetic space, and suggests the city’s properties of creativity and participation. Lefebvre argues that this dialogic quality is related to the city’s identity as oeuvre or collective, creative work. Monuments, in this sense, are not to be defined narrowly as military or national memorials and do not necessarily gesture to a shared, imaginary pre-modernity. Rather, they may include sites of intense specularization and structures that exert a strong “collecting” effect on the populace. They are places that function as metonyms for a more general social order. Thus, the experimental city symphonies examine monuments that range from the inspiring to the prosaic – train stations and elevated trains, skyscrapers and parks. In doing so, they stress these sites as polyrhythmic oeuvre, rather than as text-product.

The urban always already has qualities of both product (divisions of labor, flows of exchange, circulation within space) and oeuvre (architectural and spatial practices, creativity/participation, engenderment and occupation of space). Abstract space, Lefebvre
argues, suppresses the city as *oeuvre* in favor of the city as product. I contend that serial-centripetal logic also participates in this suppression because it composes the center as a pyramid from which space may be analyzed, conceived, and viewed – but never negotiated. In order to fracture this abstract space, symphonies of the center perform a rhythmanalysis of the built environment. They narrate space generally conceived of as a text-product as instead an experiential monument-*oeuvre*. In doing so, they disclose the experiential space that is normally obscured by conceptual space’s totalizing text and reanimate the idea of the city center as a creative, collective work to which the masses have a right. In this regard, they produce differential space.

**Rhythmanalysis**

Lefebvre uses the term rhythmanalysis to identify and analyze the various linear and cyclic rhythms that make up the experience of the built urban environment and the social space it engenders. Rhythmanalysis is first and foremost the subjectification of urban space: it begins at the level of the body and is the work of becoming conscious of the unconscious rhythms that sustain us. This quasi-pathological investigation allows the analyst both to perceive the rhythms internal to her own body and those of the built environment that position and help determine the spatial practices of that body: “to capture a rhythm one must be captured by it.”

Rhythmanalysis is also a kind of partiality; in other words to analyze lived rhythm is to thread the labyrinth. As a partial structure, rhythmanalysis allows for the narration of the urban center as *oeuvre*, revealing its creative capacity and the working bodies (both human and architectural) that compose it without reducing it to a representation of space or a seemingly neutral location from which urban space may be conceptualized and transmuted into sign. In producing the urban center as a work, the experimental city symphonies narrate an alternative social order in which the center is a collective, participatory, and plural *oeuvre* constantly evolving with and according to its users’
needs and bodies – and one where cinema is a constitutive element of that work. This narration ranges from the tacit construction of several closely related, limited sites as constituting a cinematic spectacle (Jazz), to the framing of the entire city within the cinematic apparatus (GO!), to the production of cinema and city as mutually constitutive, collective, unfinished works (Skyscraper).

Canonic accounts of the experimental films claim that their style renders them apolitical, formal exercises. Yet, the films’ style is precisely what allows them to perform this analysis and narration. In the same way that a rhythm-analyst best grasps the body’s rhythms when they are “out of sync,” the experimental city symphonies’ grasped the spatial relations of New York when they were out of sync with cinematic realism. As Lauren Rabinovitz says, the experimental city symphonies disrupted “the optical realism of the cinematographic image through photographic distortions, tints and color saturations, superimpositions, and various types of photographic processing.” Moreover, several directors of experimental city symphonies repeatedly approached the city itself with the desire to exhibit their cinematic bodily rhythms, movements, and gestures. For example, Shirley Clarke, trained as a dancer, had made several dance films in the early 1950s and, in her study of several Manhattan bridges, Bridges-go-round, attempted to translate dance to architecture. However, city symphony scholars like Scott MacDonald consistently argue that the experimental symphonies are simply “self-expressions” of their directors that naively “celebrate” New York. MacDonald positions the experimental films of the center as uncritical, needlessly ornamental, hymns to the urban as form, speed, and color in contrast to the inherent political stakes and stance of their marginal cousins. MacDonald, in fact, explicitly affirms that the experimental symphonies – here typified by N.Y., N.Y. – reinscribe New York as a product and evince a touristic view of the space: “Thompson shatters the action he records into a graphic space suggestive of a beehive … Thompson provides a memorable sense of an emotion many of us have felt during trips to New York.” MacDonald does not see that
their style composes the urban center as a series of irreducible spatial practices articulated to the bodily rhythms of the space’s primary users.

Not only do experimental city symphonies narrate the urban center as a series of monument-œuvre, their production, distribution, and exhibition contexts intentionally construct them – as both individual texts and as a group – as cinematic monuments. Just as the partial structure of “secret passages” directly challenged contemporary representations of space that produced the margins as minatorial, so too is the partial structure of the monument responsive to its historical context. The symphonies of the center usually competed at international festivals or world expositions, sites that provided opportunities for the United States government to advance a nationalist (and neo-imperialist) agenda that depended on the microcosmic logic of the pavilion and the text-products displayed therein, but which also acted as alternative centers for film distribution and conceived of cinema as a work instead of a product.17

For example, the city symphonies of Stan Brakhage, Francis Thompson, and Shirley Clarke all screened in Brussels in 1958, at either The Brussels World Exposition or The Brussels Experimental Film Festival. City symphonies frequently belonged to the international art circuit. An even better example of the films’ dependence on art exhibition outlets is Ian Hugo’s Jazz of Lights, a symphony of Times Square. Jazz screened at film festivals in Edinburgh and Basel as well as the Eighth UNESCO Conference. The film also had a long run at Cinema 16, arguably New York’s repertory art film “festival.”

Jazz connects very specific sites and sights to unique local spatial practices. Indeed, it can be read as a kind of attempt to draw out the neighborhood qualities of the city’s least residential and “homelike” district. But, in both Basel and UNESCO, where it won awards, it played as part of the American exhibit and was advertised not as a “personal view” of the experiential aspects of Times Square but rather as an expression of American ingenuity and of daily life in the modern western world.18 Thompson and
Clarke’s works experienced similar positioning at Brussels, and in the case of Clarke’s film *Skyscraper*, the 1959 Venice Film Festival as well. These films could also be understood as expressions of national identity.

After their initial exhibitions and foreign circulation, the experimental city symphonies often resumed domestic life by being screened as a block. This practice was begun in January 1959 at Cinema 16 and repeated by other local film societies and art houses to the present day. These screenings: compiled multiple, irreducible views of the center, placed them in a dialectic relation to each other in or across programs, and contextualized them in the alternative social space of Cinema 16. By combining these components, these screenings produced a kind of differential monumentality.

**Jazz of Lights: Prophets of Sleaze**

Although positioned as a metonymy for New York as serial-centripetal abstract space by *Naked City* (among many other popular texts), Times Square was largely devoid of monumental architecture during the mid-century. Although home to the headquarters of The New York Times Corporation, large Broadway theatres such as the Booth, New Amsterdam, and Lyceum, the last movie palaces, and hotels, no single structure functioned as a dominant iconic or centripetal monument. Times Square is most recognizable at night, when the buildings are invisible and so pose no distraction from the objects that lend the area its character – the countless, crowded advertisements lighted in neon, florescent, and klieg lights. The arrangement of these ads trace the area’s triangular contours, the square formed where the diagonal of Broadway slices across Seventh Avenue from 46th to 42nd streets, disrupting the street grid and emphasizing the gigantic aspect of the urban canyons it engenders.

The possibility of the center existing as a monument-*oeuvre* composed by the polyrhythmic bodies that create its constitutive rhythms is always in tension with and often suppressed by the serial-centripetal logic that conceives of the city (and particularly
the center) as text-product. Perhaps no space is more associated with this latter definition than Times Square, which is nevertheless a favorite location for city symphonies. Much as Weegee narrated the space as a midway-like home to “live turtles and cut-rate souvenirs,” Ian Hugo’s *Jazz of Lights* contemplates it as a space that finds the sacred in the surreal and abject. To be in Times Square is to be engulfed in and bathed from above by money as it is reduced to pure sign and pure luminescence. As might be intuited from its title, *Jazz of Lights* does “play” on this luminescence, but it is far better known for its exploration of the area’s street life and its rhythms: it features the small purveyors of exploitation films, hotdogs, and souvenirs that mass at the feet of the multinational ads, those who display their more modest wares through plate glass windows and flickering signs.

Times Square is thus the perfect example of serial-centripetal space and the totalized city as text-product, but it is also quite literally an empty center. This hole in the middle of the city, so closely associated with the serial anonymity of hyper-modernity and specular capital, also harkens back to the origin of social space itself. Lefebvre argues that, from antiquity to the height of classical Greek civilization, settlements were founded through, and organized around, a physical hole or oubliette at their center. This allowed the society to found or engender a space by instantiating a difference or border between the familiar social space and spiritual-natural space (or more generally the unknown). These founding gaps – which narrate the city as a work – gradually became representational spaces and were crucial to western cities through the advent of the Renaissance supercode until they were displaced by the totalizing encoding of representations of space.23 Jazz evokes the buried, archaic qualities of this most modern of spaces while suggesting the ways in which Times Square’s tendency to reduce space to image can be countered by blurring the boundaries between the area’s spectacular attractions and cinema’s spectacle: the film goes to great lengths to evoke the ways in which Times Square’s potential as monument-*oeuvre* depends on its cinematic qualities.
The first image of the film features its title on a theater marquee bordered by red and gold light bulbs, with the disembodied reflections of headlights and traffic lights floating like a scrim in front of it [figure A17]. By placing the title inside the space it chronicles, sandwiching the sign of a filmic – and, as becomes evident, partly fictional – text between two documentary elements drawn from life, Hugo suggests that his work is not merely “a personal view” of “the tawdriness and charm of Times Square” – as the film was described in Cinema 16’s program notes – but rather that the film contributes to and renews the space. The superimposition of marquee, text, and lights extend the title of the film as a description of Times Square and suggest that the basic qualities of this area are inextricably linked to the visual attractions – cinema among them – that cluster within it. Of course, cinema itself could be accurately described as a jazz of lights, as images playing out of the projector, dancing in front of its bulb. In fact, the “tint” of the title extends to the next image of the sequence, that of a red-bathed shop window that fills the entire frame, linking the ephemeral product of film with the concrete space of commerce, remaking the store as a darkroom. The framing of the area as itself a kind of cinematic attraction continues in the first sequence shots of the film. Rather than granting subjects the kind of spatial omniscience that comes with establishing shots, Jazz limits shots to three feet above the surface of the sidewalk and then distorts the image so that both legs of commuters and bases of buildings appear folded, accordion-like, in funhouse mirrors. The distortion places renewed emphasis on the act of walking as something requiring effort and creativity, bringing the body into contact with an environment stripped of its common identifying marks, reducing to pure spatial practice, as simply something that organizes and displays rhythm.

Hugo then further blurs the boundary between his filmmaking practice and provocations and the area’s own natural rhythms. The next several shots – the first to draw farther back than a close-up (to medium-long) and to include motion (tracking) – finally rise to the level of the storefront and then immediately encounter two figures
whose slow pace distinguishes them from the rapid progress of the crowd – a helmeted astronaut and a man wearing a Franciscan friar’s robe. The two pass each other in front of a lunch counter with no interaction; neither garners comment or even regard from the diners. As credits and publicity materials make clear, the friar was played by performance artist Moondog, but the astronaut was simply a living, walking ad for the Galaxy Diner. The latter hawks for a business while the former’s costume signifies a rebuke and rejection of worldly things. But both perform the same slow, repeated circuit of the sidewalk. At odds with the purposeful passage of commuters or pause of diners, they disrupt and reveal the area’s dominant rhythms.

As the monk walks out of the frame on the right, the camera follows and then passes him, moving into a point of view sequence that allows the viewer to perceive familiar sights anew, re-viewing them through the bodily rhythms produced by the flâneur-monk. Just as the monk first appeared by crossing paths with a living sign, his presence reconnects and redefines the area’s signs of escape and nonsense with everyday activity. For example, the storefront next to the lunch counter proves to be a theater lobby advertising The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms with a large, animatronic dinosaur. The decontextualized image of the fanciful beast cuts to a shot of the modern dinosaurs that roam Times Square and are responsible for transforming the present built environment into the past: bulldozers. The machines are made to suggest the dinosaur’s roar with a soundbridge that marks one of the only incorporations of sourced sound in the soundtrack otherwise dominated by the electronic score of Louis and Bebe Barron.

This section, characterized by the transformations of signs through their uptake by rhythm, is succeeded by a section characterized by longer, more fluid takes and complex superimposition as spaces “activated” by the event of the monk’s passing begin to accrue meaning to themselves through the presence of a new subject and the new rhythms she produces. An extended take of a doll in a store window rotating on her pedestal to display her gown eventually reframes to reveal the form of Hugo’s wife, the author Anaïs Nin,
whose reflection in the window appears to place her as much in the display as outside it, emphasizing the indeterminacy of inside and outside and suggesting that even purely visual consumption has its own accompanying spatial practices and rhythms.

As though mimicking Nin’s steady, analytic gaze at the motionless doll in the window, the next cut is to a subway entrance where the low framing of the shot contemplates the motion of pant cuffs and skirts as they are blown by the wind from the grate. This shot is repeated in fast and slow motion, focusing especially on the afterimage of clothes billowing out from the skin, as the soundtrack seemingly responds to the pace of the images, speeding up and slowing down in tandem with them. By matching the overt otherworldliness of the electronic scales in the score to the mundane nature and bodily content of the images, these shots both naturalize the fast and slow motion of the shots by reinscribing their pace in the score and defamiliarize the “normal” speed of the action by pairing it with sounds that seem utterly disconnected from the visual environment. In addition, because they directly follow the shop window scene, these shots allow for the comparison of the dwelling/dressing of the doll and Nin and the similar interplay of commuting bodies and the built environment of the subway.

The final two sections return to the locations chronicled at the film’s start, but depend heavily on superimposition, so that the places depicted can only be glimpsed and understood through those that have unspooled before them; the encirclement of Times Square by Jazz of Lights is now complete. In the film’s final image, Nin returns to look at a glass seahorse through the shop window, seems to see the streetlights superimposed upon it, and turns and walks away into a blackout. In this shot, Hugo neatly inverts the typical conception of Times Square as it is encapsulated by the final shot of Naked City. In that conclusion, the well-known line “there are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them,” is spoken over a tight shot of a tabloid with the face of murdered Jean Dexter being swept away. Then the camera pulls back and up, revealing the glittering panorama of Times Square that renders Dexter’s life a disappointment and
her death a meaningless drop in the pool of serial mass culture. By contrast, Hugo concludes in a quiet scene dominated by a solitary, active female figure who appears conscious of her own position as mere commodity within the social fabric, and rejects it. This figure is refracted through the window as she looks at a singular object that, like Weegee’s live turtles, lacks a metonymic relation to its surroundings but nevertheless occupies the center of the viewer’s attention before she turns away from commodity and spectacle, triggering the end of the film. Unlike the serial centripality of abstract space, the rhythmanalysis of Times Square insists on measuring the area through the rhythms created by subversive bodies. By superimposing these spatial practices on the area’s own complex, contradictory rhythms, Jazz demonstrates that this overwhelming, unified space – a center so specular it is always already conceived as an text-product – has internal rhythms and is first produced through spatial practices. In doing so, Jazz dislocates objects and viewers, removing the normal signification of Times Square and throwing viewers back on their own immediate experiences of space while retaining traces of and commenting upon the area’s dominant logic.

Jazz produces a series of spatial practices that narrate Times Square as a kind of inverted monument, a space both collectively composed and strangely empty, an emptiness filled by a riot of images both real and cinematic, together capable of composing the area as experiential space and conceptualizing it as a work. Rather than reduce the space to a metonymy of serial-centripetal hyper-modernity – a present that has banished the past to the margins – Jazz elucidates the traces of multiple temporalities and the plural rhythms on which the center is founded. In exhibition at festivals and as part of a potential “independent” canon, the film not only produced the rhythms at play within the center, but also conceived ways in which the center as such could be moved, fracturing abstract space and producing differential space. As Anaïs Nin wrote of Jazz: “Hugo manipulates with skill the elements which dislocate or blur objects to reveal new aspects of them as they are revealed in emotional states.”27 That is, Jazz of Lights
transforms the cheap monument that epitomizes late modern abstract space as “congealed thing” into a series of subjective rhythms constitutive of the space as an œuvre – while insisting on cinema as a constitutive aspect of the work of the city.

**Wonder Ring: The Urban Carousel**

*Jazz’s* adoption and expansion of “New York Fantasy’s” locations and tactics inspired the later experimental city symphonies, perhaps none so directly as *Wonder Ring*. Like *Jazz*, *Ring*’s visual economy is dedicated to suggesting the mutually constitutive bodily rhythms of city and cinema. *Ring* also depends on superimposition to explore the center’s rhythms while constructing an ambiguous – simultaneously interior and exterior – vantage point that enables those rhythms to be captured while catching the film up in them. Finally, like *Jazz*, *Ring* produces the polyrhythmic aspects of a space that is also a non-space, albeit in different ways. If *Jazz* studies the spectacle-hole at the city’s center, then *Ring* studies a space characterized as a pause or gap, a non-place that connects real places: the subway.

The film details a ride on the Third Avenue El. Where *Jazz* dealt with Times Square by tracing the constitutive rhythms of an “empty” monument, *Ring* almost immediately became a memorial to a vanished one. The Third Avenue El was the last casualty of the city government’s consolidation of transportation after its final assumption of control over all mass transport infrastructure in 1953, when it completed its buy out of the private subway companies. Service to the outer boroughs and elevated trains were particularly affected, and small but continuous protests of closures were common from the late 1940s to 1955, when the process was complete. In 1955, artist Joseph Cornell approached Stan Brakhage to shoot footage of the last remaining elevated line in Manhattan. That footage eventually became both *Wonder Ring* – an attempt by Brakhage to evoke musical rhythm in a silent film through the motion of the train – and Cornell’s *Gnir Rednow* (1955), which recut *Ring* with additional footage and projected
the results in reverse. By the time it was shown at Cinema 16 in 1959, *Ring* could function as “a nostalgic look back,” at a missing part of the city’s built environment (and a defunct group of spatial practices) by depicting “an intensively subjective impression of an El ride.”

However, *Ring* is not so much a rider’s impression of a trip on the El as it is an evocation of the El itself as an urban subject that witnesses, retains, and integrates the phenomena it encounters on a run into its own identity, evoking both Lefebvre’s discussion of architecture’s bodies and Bernard Tschumi’s assertion that, when understood in terms of experience and the labyrinth: “architecture is defined by the actions it witnesses as much as by the enclosure of its walls.” The film is marked by the camera’s vantage point – most shots originate from inside the car, making this one of the only city symphonies to prominently feature interiors – and by constant allusions to the camera and other technologies of filmmaking throughout. The film is shot on completely denatured black and white stock, such that the entire proceedings occur bathed in the overexposed red that recalls the photography or film lab, the color lent to negatives examined in the dark: like *Jazz*, *Wonder Ring* narrates the city as a cinematic work by making the urban environment gesture to or even resemble the actual material of celluloid.

The film begins with a shot of the covered stairs leading up to the El platform, then cuts to handheld footage of an ascent from the commuter’s point of view that concentrates on the shadows cast by the handrails on the steps. The stairs come to resemble a kind of tunnel with a vanishing point at their apex. The camera’s arrival on the platform is accompanied by the first horizontal pan, which features the doors to the platform, the ticket booth, and latticework on the trestles and support beams. This 360-degree shot is the first “ring” that appears in the film and anticipates the camerawork that will dominate the remainder of the film once the ride begins. That is, the film intimates a gesturing human figure as a perceiving subject though the shakiness of the camerawork
and also begins to construct the mechanic point of view at its center even before the train’s arrival. The body that moves the camera anticipates the El’s body. While the train is the film’s primary subject, it is continually articulated to the technologies of cinema, as in this shot. Here, the street is visible on the far side of the platform, but the traffic is framed by the crenulated lines of the vertical railings, so that the street appears to be trapped in celluloid with the railing serving as the perforations on the film strip.

The train arrives and, in a close-up, registers as the erasure or absenting of the image and is then only perceptible as inference, as the gaps and light showing between cars. After a hard shot elides the act of entering the car, again suggesting a continuity of perception and space between the inside and outside of the train (and between built environment and cinema), a circular pan is evoked by a series of skillfully edited shots that foreground the curvilinear lines of the city streets below the end of the grid. The origin of the shots is always evident, as the distortion and grime of the train windows feature continually – although the borders of the windows are not seen. As the train picks up speed, the first shots of the interior focus on the swaying of the light fixtures, immediately rhymed with the next shot of lights flashing on the exterior of the train roof, again linking inside to outside and the camera operator to the El. The ambiguous vantage point speaks to the nature of the train, which is closed off from the static built environment but whose movement is determined by and naturalizes the form of an environment both private and public, negotiating between home and work. This rhythmanalysis produces the El as an experiential space in and of itself, possessed of its own time and productive of its own unique spatial practices beyond its function as pace-setter for the serial-centripetal pull of abstract space.

In Wonder Ring, the handheld technique associated with what MacDonald called “personally self-expressive filmmaking” is used to craft the self-expression of a machine and to give that machine a body capable of producing experiential space. As the train arrives in the station, the idea of the train as a perceiving body is extended through
increased emphasis on its relation to the surrounding built structures. A shot of the tracks is superimposed over a shot of the platform, collapsing the progress of the train along its route into present and future, stillness and motion. Back in the car, Brakhage shoots close-ups of other riders against the windows so that portraits of passengers seem to float on the sides of the buildings behind them with no intervening space, making explicit the links among habit, dwelling, and dressing/wearing. The film ends not with an arrival, but with the train gaining speed as it rushes onwards. In the last shot, the camera moves outside the car to focus on the rushing of the downtown tracks beside it, as though anticipating the return trip the train will soon make. Thus, the train’s subjectivity and negotiation of space gain a temporal dimension: it remembers and accumulates the history of this run, recording and projecting it back like a film.

Where Grierson feared that Berlin reduced the viewer to simply a cog in the indifferent machine of the city, Brakhage places the viewer within the non-anthropomorphic subjectivity of the consummate urban machine. The clue to the film’s point of view is its title. A subway ride is a straight line, not a ring, unless it is conceived in terms of the daily routine of commutation stripped of all intervening itinerary. The film features only a one-way ride from the East Village to the Upper East Side. The “ring” so studiously constructed by each shot is the way in which this space is perceived by the train that traverses it repeatedly every day. By recasting linear rhythm as circular rhythm, Brakhage reorients the viewer to experience the ride as itself the goal or subject. Ring narrates the El as a work that both produces its own perception of space and orients the spatial practices of others, as opposed to a delivery system that facilitates the production of more products. Moreover, Brakhage teases out the monumental qualities of the subway, that most humble and itinerant structure. Like a stationary monument, the subway is a dialogic space that traverses public and private spaces and modes of discourse, evident here in the private experience of rider/viewer and the public, collective memories of the subway/viewer.
N.Y., N.Y.: The Peace and Giants of Penn Station

Like Jazz and Ring, Francis Thompson’s N.Y., N.Y. performs the rhythmanalysis of monuments, discovering the intertwined circadian practices of citizens and seemingly empty, suspended, or inhumanly scaled public places. Like Ring, N.Y. memorializes a monument soon to vanish from the city’s visible topography: the original 1903 McKim, Mead, and White Pennsylvania Station, which was demolished in 1963-64. The film, however, is distinct in two ways from its predecessors. First, it approximates the structure of “New York Fantasy” much more closely than Jazz or Ring, featuring multiple locations in the urban center and detailing an entire day; second, the film does not attempt to evoke the cinema – in terms of apparatus or materiality – directly, or suggest that the city is itself in some way a product of a cinematic consciousness. In fact, critical discussion of N.Y. has consistently turned on its subordination of architecture – and, moreover, lived experience of the urban – to the techniques and capabilities of film as a medium.

For example, Cinema 16 publicized both Jazz and Ring by referencing the specific areas or objects featured in the films in connection to emotional qualifiers that referred equally to the film and the location shot. So, Jazz was described as “the tawdriness and charm of Times Square: a personal view,” attributing a brassy charisma to the space itself. Ring was both “a nostalgic backward glance” to the Third Avenue line itself and “an intensely subjective impression of an El ride.” By contrast, both a qualitative commentary on the nature of urban space and a sense of authorial subjectivity are absent from the Cinema 16 notice for N.Y.: “a dazzling and stunning display of cinematic trickery and ingenuity, leading to some of the most breathtakingly poetic images of the city ever captured on film.” 33 Here, the content of the film is film itself, considered as separate from the not-quite-natural “images of the city” (as opposed to Times Square or the El themselves) that it both creates and captures. This evaluation of the text extends from the Cinema 16 notes, to Loren Cocking’s 1969 description of the
film as a collection of “cinematic apparitions,” to MacDonald’s more recent reduction of the film’s interest to its special effects.\textsuperscript{34}

From Martin F. Norden’s 1981 critique in \textit{Millennium} to Scott MacDonald’s 2008 evaluation of the film, scholars have consistently remarked on the film’s visual ingenuity, structural simplicity, and thorough conventionality, to the extent that MacDonald claims “now that Thompson’s effects are more easily recognized for what they are, some of the original impact of \textit{N.Y.} has been lost.”\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, MacDonald has pointed to the film as a direct companion to \textit{Berlin} in terms of its detachment from “particular lives” and its inability or unwillingness to analyze and critique the city. That is, MacDonald explicitly claims that the film absents lived space, retreating into the mental non-space of Thompson’s imagination. I reject this claim and instead argue for the film’s critical function as differential space through its rhythmanalysis of monumental space. The film uses the structure of an ordinary working day and the prototypical working environment to explore the qualities of the sublime lurking in these spaces. \textit{N.Y., N.Y.} confronts the paradigmatic structures of seriality and centripetal panoramic logic and distills their gigantic qualities.\textsuperscript{36}

These qualities of engulfment and incorporation so important to the gigantic are evident in the film’s subtitle: \textit{A Day in New York}. The titles of earlier symphonies intimate an exterior vantage point or miniaturizing relationship to urban space, constructing the city as something that can be comprehended as a unified entity from outside its limits (e.g. \textit{Berlin: Symphony of a Great City}). In this instance, however, “in” connotes a sense of incorporation and engulfment while the repetition/abbreviation of the film’s subject as “New York, New York” means that the city does not stand on its own as a mental construct or product, but is itself engulfed by the larger geographic and political space of the state whose capital it is not. In this case, the city gives its own address, speaks itself as “the longing mark that is the proper name” and re-stages the incompletion of narrative and space that constructs its identity.\textsuperscript{37} That is to say, although \textit{N.Y., N.Y.}
prominently features iconic landmarks typical of a postcard view, it articulates them in terms of local use and rhythm: architecture produces bodies that reproduce themselves within users in a way that is inaccessible to tourists.38

The film begins not with the cubist and abstract imagery for which it is famous, not with the excess of shallow vision attributed to it, but in darkness, with the lonely sound of a ship’s horn on the soundtrack; as Lefebvre argues, sound is prior to vision in the production of space and lies at the heart of rhythmanalysis.39 Throughout the film, in fact, the soundtrack is consistently tied both to the natural space that is otherwise largely absent from the film and used to evoke a realistic, layered aural cityscape. For example, the blaring brass of the score and its overlay on more lyrical string-based passages evokes the density of traffic and crowd scenes and also stages the way in which such density never resolves itself into induced unity: the longer, sweeter rhythms of strollers caught up in an urban reverie is still perceptible – and is in some ways defined – by the crush and crash of purposeful pedestrians and public transport.

For example, even after the ship’s horn fades on the soundtrack, the first section remains tied to the docks, and the soundtrack is filled with eerie, slightly off-key harps that keep the lapping of the river present in the film even as it disappears from the image track, where built structures like bridges and cranes seem to float in space. The first image in N.Y. is a ship’s pilot light, followed by the blinding warning lights on a drawbridge. Successive images build a dreamlike atmosphere, as cranes appear to float, disembodied across the frame. This sequence is unified by the dominant color scheme of purple, which also offer a temporal reference point (dawn). The leisurely pace is maintained as the camera slides along a bridge, an underpass, and a train trestle, using Weegee’s disorienting extreme wide-angle lenses to suggest equivalence of importance, scale, and rhythm among the diverse elements. This overture ends with the first use of the special effect with which the film is most associated. Thompson repeatedly uses the reflective surface of mylar to bend, excise, or double objects and distort their shapes as
though in funhouse mirrors. Here, it is used to distort and double a shot of a skyscraper. The building appears three times: once in full profile frame right, once in full profile frame left, and once as a blurry, flattened surface occupying the lower fourth of the frame [figure A18]. The imagery turns a single plane surface into a U that actually speaks to the ziggurat-like set backs of the lower levels of skyscrapers, suggests a crane-necked, street-level view of the building – the vantage point from which this feature is most apparent – and exemplifies the descriptive locus of the gigantic.

Contrary to MacDonald’s claim that the start of a commuter’s day serves as the film’s beginning, we do not encounter “the alarm clock waking a city dweller by shattering itself into a cubist image” until nearly a quarter of the way through the film.40 This delay and the intense emphasis on time of day in the opening sequence – the purple indicates a 5 a.m. dawn, while the alarm clock registers 7:30 – suggest two different “risings,” the one of the city (which does not sleep, and moves with the hesitancy of any insomniac) and the other of its citizens. The suggestion is that “cyclic” or slower rhythms are overlaid on “alternate” or quicker rhythms, people and their environment both producing complex, intertwined spatial practices that together engender a social space. The resolute use of ground views and eschewal of panorama, moreover, construct the city’s subjectivity as something arising from within instead of witnessed or imputed from without. This is reemphasized by the lack of a commute into the center from the periphery such as the one opening Berlin. The articulation of waterfront, bridge, and skyscraper ensures that their commonality as monumental aspects of the city as a collective is emphasized rather than the conventional representation of space that situates them as a temporalized spatial arrangement that must be conceptualized and traversed in terms of capital. Finally, the sequence “arrives” not at work, but inside a private residential space, ensuring that the typical opening motif of the commute refers to one occurring within the city’s borders. At the same time, the resolution of what is apparently the start of a commute sequence with an arrival at home instead of a departure from it
subverts this dominant itinerary and again suggests that the city’s own “point of view” – soon to be replaced by that of an embodied, socio-economically inscribed citizen – rather than that of a serialized routine, is being presented.

The film both presents an interior residential space and conveys an “insider’s” – or, more properly, experiential – understanding of that space. Our citizen lives in the classic four-story brownstone. However, the particular exterior of this house is the less common white stone, which appears sporadically throughout the city but is most often seen on the Upper East Side, Gramercy Park, or Greenwich Village. The subsequent subway commute to Penn Station further narrows the possible location to the Village. The film’s insistence on linking – by means of a series of pull focus shots and blurred horizontal pans, both of which suggest spatial continuity – the waking section to the subway to a seamless arrival at the train station implies that an intelligible itinerary along the above lines is meant to be communicated to and parsed by the viewer. The film allows the viewer to imagine not just “life in the city” but particular spatial practices connected to specific socio-economic subject positions. Unlike the train station as cathedral in Berlin, Penn Station is here both a terminus and a marker of a particular neighborhood.

Moreover, the arrival sequence foregrounds the potential of narrating monuments as the gigantic. On the subway, replicated images of straps, straphangers, seated passengers, and poles all take on the pendulum racket and sway of the train both suggesting the motion of the train registering on and uniting the bodies within it – as well as the sheer number of commutes simultaneously being undertaken. The speed at play is reinforced by the rapidity of the editing and the jangling cacophony of horns on the soundtrack, until the editing rhythm slows, a melody arises, the motion of the camera stills, and the multiple images of commuters resolve into one. As the viewer perceives the train sliding to a halt, there is a hard cut to black, and then image returns as the camera emerges from an escalator to reveal the high, vaulted glass ceiling of the 1903 main
terminal at Penn Station. In one of the longest shots of the film, as the soundtrack goes quiet, Thompson holds on this scene as the viewer slowly realizes that the fantastic cubist imagery replicated here is in fact not the result of special effects but rather is produced by the complex glass vaulting and leading of the ceiling itself [figure A19]. The unified monument always already contains a sense of polyrhythmic, fragmented experience, negotiating the permeable border of individual and built environment while suggesting their rhythmic commonalities.

As the film follows the familiar trajectory of the city symphony, monuments continually act as punctuation, unifying the screen, marking act changes, and pausing the film’s headlong momentum, allowing the viewer time to assimilate stimuli and reorient him or herself, just as one does in everyday life. For example, the lunch break is marked by the clock on the façade of Grand Central Terminal, a structure that is itself home to multiple restaurants. But rather than use lunchtime to socially locate the citizenry, as Berlin does, here the regimented “freedom” of the hour is suggested by the increased freedom of the editing, as the street is suddenly populated with disembodied legs trapped between the sidewalk and its reflection at the top of the frame. Instead of naturalizing the temporal organization of labor, Thompson both demonstrates the constraints on workers through the doubling of the ground and turns the workers themselves into lunch, sandwiching them within the frame. Similarly, the typical leisure activities of the afternoon section are exchanged for a construction of capitalist architecture as itself a type of the sublime, as ever more surreal and dizzying images of skyscrapers dominate the image track. This leads to the literal scraping of the sky, as buildings are atomized, their tips cut out and pasted into a perfect blue vault. The film does not so much progress as it does evaporate, cutting from the motionless sky to a silent blackout.

The final section, set at Times Square after dark, restores the city’s materiality. Unlike the night sections of other city symphonies, here the fall of darkness leads to the increase of literal representation and the close connection of phenomena to their
referents. For example, the aural tuning up of an orchestra, never depicted as a whole, is accompanied by the depiction of the appropriate instruments, their visual distortion matching the blue notes that register on the soundtrack. By multiplying, distorting, and atomizing the anonymous, soulless spaces of midtown, N.Y. redefines them as a space of amusement and shock. This occurs, moreover, not through the valorization of exterior and totalizing vision, but with the loss of vision and intensification of collectivity that occurs at the feet of the giant, or while dwarfed by the columns and vaults of Penn Station.42

GO!GO!GO!: The Anti-Circle Line Tour

While the above films evoke the dialogic qualities of monuments and narrate them in terms of their rhythms, each does so by limiting itself to sharply circumscribed catalogues of objects, suggesting the enmity between differential space and the abstraction of serial-centripetal logic. The films’ emphasis on engulfment, memory, and the bodily rhythms of the camera also suggests that the abstract and lethal qualities of serial-centripetal logic’s production of the city as text-product are indebted to the exterior view it composes. The city as text-product produces a view from the outside that, as Stewart argues miniatures must, composes the city into a tableaux that emphasizes description and stills narrative, and reduces it to an outsized snow globe of assembled clichés. Miniatures are devoid of experiential space in part because they forbid itineraries, which is to say they exclude motion and rhythm.43 To what extent can the giants Thompson evokes through the space of Penn Station be produced through a view of the city as a whole? How could such a view remain internal rather than external? Performing a rhythmanalysis of the entire city is possible to the extent that it includes the city without claiming to encompass it, analyzes multiple rhythms without attempting to resolve them, and produces the urban totality as a collective work instead of a unified product. This is the strategy that Menken’s GO!GO!GO! employs, in concert with time-lapse
photography and an emphasis on personal expression and gesture. By subjecting the entire city and the entire film to time-lapse photography, Menken suggests that *GO!* is not a depiction of “The City,” but rather the expression of its constitutive rhythms, which are reproduced within the film, render the film subject to the pace of the city, and suggest its internal status. At the same time, the film – and thus the city – is encapsulated and guided by the rhythms of Menken’s body and gestures, creating a strangely doubled rhythmic structure, where the film acts as the overlap between the rhythms of the individual body and the collective built environment and, at the same time, it makes the former constitutive of the latter. In *GO!* representing the city as a totality is impossible because it is always already irreducibly plural.

The film not only depicts the familiar sights/sites of Midtown, but also ventures farther afield to the residential neighborhood of the Lower East Side, the amusement park at Coney Island, the peripheral retail center of Astoria, Queens, and the educational refuges of the Upper Bronx. The film begins with its title written on a mirror placed at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge so that, in a strategy similar to that of *Jazz*, the film is literally superimposed on its environment. The title is doubled, occupying not only the realm of written language but also that of nonverbal gesture as a hand waves and beckons, flashing across the frame three times. The triad of built structure, language, and body is reinforced by the prominent presence of a hair in the gate, emphasizing the hand in relation to the body from which it came, the body that holds the camera that produces the city and inscribes that body into the body of the film.

The film springs into motion as the bridge is traversed, and then the Financial District quickly flashes by. The suggestion of an architectural panorama is quickly dispelled, however, both by the carefully located position of the camera and the immediate subsequent images. The camera rides in the window of a car, flattened low to the surface of the bridge, craning up to look at the towers of the bridge and panning across the structures of Lower Manhattan. The camera moves through the streets
recording the rhythms enacted on them and the connections between them; it does not hover above them and emphasize their serial nature. The view, like that of N.Y.’s gigantism, derives from inside the city and not outside it. Moreover, the monumental structures of the Financial District give way to the crowded outdoor markets of the Lower East Side, where the camera lingers over a basketball game in progress on the playground at the corner of Essex and Rivington Streets. Time-lapse here results in this intimate site receiving as much attention and registering as important and as complex as the bridge crossed to reach it.

The alternation between monument and neighborhood detail continues as the film proceeds uptown and across to the west side, even as Go! begins to weave prior city symphonies into the built environment of the city. For example, the first shot of the harbor and the Hudson originate from Chelsea Piers, just as they do in Weegee’s, and the sequence concludes almost identically, with a boat headed straight toward the camera. This is followed with a high-angle shot of the intersection of Sixth Avenue and Fifty-Third Street, the very intersection chronicled by Shirley Clarke four years before in Skyscraper. The shot lingers, displaying the traffic pattern and efficiency of the grid as pedestrians flow across the intersection in a kind of stuttering dance. The origin of these workers is suggested in the next sequence, which features students filling seats and then filing across a stage in a graduation ceremony situated on a green near a river. The regimented movement of the graduates recalls that of the workers they will become, even as the editing links the green areas of leisure at the city’s edge to the working skyscrapers at the city center.

The next section is devoted to longer studies of single locations in which breaks in the dominant rhythm – and intimations of alternative spatial practices of other social orderings – become apparent, as when the flow of businessmen through a revolving door hesitates over one who retreats to the side of the door to smoke and converse with the doorman. Studies of construction work, weddings, and stage performance are followed by
shots of the creative process itself, as a man (Menken’s husband Willard Maas) writes on a balcony overlooking Brooklyn Promenade. He is seated at a card table with a marble bust beside him, his back to the skyline behind him. This intimate – and perhaps parodic – scene of high culture is undercut with the next sequence, which depicts the boardwalk and beach of Coney Island with shots and angles highly reminiscent of Weegee. The beach is left behind for the quieter Astoria, where Menken focuses on the constantly retreating backs of two nuns, who recall the final shots of In the Street. The film concludes by returning to Manhattan and the waterfront, where monumental space and everyday life are conjoined in a shot that features a working construction site in the foreground and the Statue of Liberty hovering unobtrusively in the background. As the sun sets, the film concludes with the reappearance of the mirror, now with “The End” written on its surface and the hand waving across it in the opposite direction from the first shot. By insisting on the mutual constitution of film and city, the conjoining of disparate sites and diverse scales, and the use of time lapse, Menken highlights the irreducible plurality of rhythm at play within New York, and the impossibility of reducing the city to a single emblematic amalgam of signs, producing the contradictions of “the city” itself as a monument of creative work and a differential space.

Lights: Festival as Monument

Go! does not completely map the city’s day, however, because it ends at sunset, in contradistinction to Jazz and N.Y. Although the silent film Menken completed immediately afterward, Lights, has not been discussed as a city symphony, this study of the city’s night lights functions as the nocturnal compliment to Go!’s diurnal study. It deals with representational spaces in much the same way GO! deals with representations of space. Just as the daylight hours of the city are reduced to a series of motions in Go!, nightly illumination becomes a festival in Lights. As Hugo, Thompson, and Weegee testify, urban evening is the society of the spectacle on display and all materiality recedes
into the distance to be signified by ephemeral florescent and neon tubes that, in the end, point only to themselves. While this representation of space can be détourned by focusing on the surreal contradictions within it (as with the advertisements for absurd objects that appear in each of the above films), Menken uses a different method. *Lights* focuses on the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center and its surrounding holiday display. Arguably, the tree is simply an engorged iteration of the sad urban sidewalk planter Lefebvre describes as the total impoverishment of natural space in modernity, a tree reduced to the mere sign of natural space. However, the Rockefeller Tree’s transience and function as the object of a festival – and thus of *social*, as opposed to natural/physical, space – testifies against this reading. The tree is an ambiguous, multifaceted body that orients a diverse group of both linear and cyclic rhythms.

Unlike the forlorn fenced-in sapling, the Rockefeller Center tree is not meant to offer the space an alibi, but rather to alter its rhythms for a proscribed amount of time. Its spatial context produces it as anomalous while providing a sense of continuity and repetition: the actual tree is different every year (natural space) but it is always the Rockefeller Center Tree (social space). Situated within a retail and broadcasting complex that houses one of the city’s largest corporations and its most expensive stores, the tree emerges as an object that lacks an exchange value or a direct connection to circulation. Like an *oeuvre*, it restores a space’s use value. The Rockefeller Center Tree is an attraction whose attraction is ritual: have you seen the tree yet this year? Like a monument, it engages a dialogue between public and private even as its civic identity acts as an inclusive counterweight to its exclusive religious function.

The film begins with a focus on cyclical motion as a glittering, multifaceted glass sculpture revolves slowly under the title. This is maintained by the first shot, which features an extreme close-up of what are not, at this point, obviously Christmas lights as the camera moves around them. The jerky motion of the camera and superimposition allow the stationary lights to take on the illusion of motion, suggesting first the red lights
of retreating cars and then the white pinpoints of stars. Menken abruptly cuts to a full length, handheld shot of the tree, only to turn the camera completely upside down so that the tree appears to revolve. *Lights* is disorienting – the viewer literally does not know where he or she is – and events are only intelligible in retrospect, as when this shot is followed by a series of streaking, decontextualized lights and leaves that eventually resolve into an extreme long shot of the tree, suggesting a walk across the plaza. The remainder of the film focuses on the area’s other lights, from the traffic on the street to the string of red lights that outlines the side of a church as though it were a theater marquee, or Little Italy in September. The film concludes by superimposing the tree in front of the traffic that flows on the streets around it, appropriating the dominant rhythm of abstract space into the absolute space of the festival. The last shot dissolves the city into light, featuring the yearly New Year’s Eve fireworks exploding over the Hudson River, the streams of traffic in Midtown, and the tree, all now indistinguishable. This duo of night and light is repeated with a close up that pans the side of the tree, the distorted lights glowing against the blackness of the needles. The tree is not a metonymy for the city as a totalized icon-product, but rather a monument that points to the irreducible multiplicity of uses, spaces, and even perceptions of time that exist within it, to the secret center of monument-*oeuvre* structured by differential space that waits within the spectacular city of abstract space.

**Shirley Clarke’s Subversive Landmarks**

All experimental city symphonies engage with and critique the center as text-product and fracture it through rhythmanalysis. Shirley Clarke’s city symphonies, however, are the more remarkable for doing so because they were commissioned for the purposes of valorizing this very narration of space. Thus, to refute this narrative, Clarke’s films are more overtly critical of it and utilize formal structures that both differ within her three films and are markedly removed from the tactics of the other experimental city
symphonies. In *Loops*, Clarke eschews time-lapse, superimposition, and special optical effects, instead drawing on a frank documentary portraiture nearly reminiscent of the marginal symphonies. The very structure of the films (which were screened as a continuous loop) foregrounds the cyclical rhythms of urban life while their subject matter de-emphasizes the built environment and proposes an alternate city center. In *Bridges-go-round*, Clarke does draw on the typical formal components of the experimental city symphonies, especially superimposition. But rather than use these tactics to draw out the city’s monumental aspects, Clarke deploys them to reveal the nightmarish vision abstract space inflicts on human perception and spatial practice. Finally, in *Skyscraper*, Clarke introduces the principles of cinema-vérité to the city symphony to recast the confluence of film and urban form intimated by *Jazz, Ring*, and *GO!* as one of collaborative labor, suggesting both cinema and city as something constructed collectively, to which the masses have a right.

Clarke’s three symphonies were, in effect, meant to stand as a monument to mid-century America as text-product. Between 1957 and 1959, Clarke was separately commissioned by the State Department and the Tishman Corporation to produce films that advanced a concept of urban space that testified to the supreme qualities and comforts of American daily life achieved through mature capitalism. *Brussels Loops* was commissioned for the United States Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World Exposition for the purposes of depicting scenes of American life in a way both intelligible and attractive to Europeans. One *Loop* was rejected by the Department and eventually became one of Clarke’s most celebrated short films, *Bridges-go-round*. A year after the Exposition, Clarke was approached by Tishman to make *Skyscraper*, a documentary about the construction of their new headquarters at 666 Fifth Avenue between 52nd and 53rd Streets. Although arguably a corporate vanity film, *Skyscraper*, like its better-pedigreed siblings, competed at a major international festival (Venice) and was marketed after its release with laudatory comments from the Department of Education that urged its use to teach
about the virtues of urban renewal, city planning, and capitalism’s democratic qualities. All three films subverted the projects they were intended to avow. In them, Clarke’s New York emerges as an assemblage of irreducible daily spatial practices and itineraries that celebrate mixed-use spaces and are produced by a complex, racially and socio-economically diverse urban population.

The *Loops* project was spearheaded by Willard van Dyke, co-director of *The City*, whose sense of humor and affection for urban life allegedly undermined the RPAA’s ideology. While the loops were intended to serve a patently patriotic and propagandistic purpose, the filmmakers “inscribed richer, more ambiguous and ironic possibilities” in their work. In her preparatory notes on the film and lists of subjects, Clarke specifically rejects monumental sites and clusters, noting for example that “there is nothing typically American about Washington D.C.” Like Rudy Burckhardt and Helen Levitt before her, Clarke’s conception of the city turns on humble and everyday images, particularly gestures and different social groupings. Rejecting what she calls the “national geographic approach,” Clarke decided instead to pursue “characteristic and not necessarily pretty settings.” While this approach certainly explains one of the best known loops, *Neon Lights* – which critiques and tweaks American consumerism and the omnipresence of advertising – it does not explain Clarke’s repeated use of the most obviously pastoral site in the city: Central Park.

In return for agreeing to a post-Expo screening for the Parks Department, commissioner Robert Moses granted Clarke the right to shoot extensively in Central Park, St. Nicholas Park, the East River Park, and Washington Square without paying permit fees because he felt that her project, backed by the State Department, would “proclaim the beauty of our city and present it in a good light to international audiences.” However, the surviving loops that feature the park – two in passing, one as the primary setting – construct it in a way much more reminiscent of Jane Jacobs’s notion of “the ballet of the street” and parks as “deprived places that need the boon of life and
appreciation conferred on them by use” than Moses’ philosophy of urban renewal and parks as the lungs of the city. In the loop called *Melting Pot*, Clarke produces the park as a social space where relations and identity are continually in flux as the language of gestures marks social groups, demographic measurements, and poses connections that cut across them.

*Melting Pot* begins with a sequence that resonates with Lefebvre’s call for a *connaissance* of space, where spatial knowledge proceeds from spatial practice as a series of meetings and encounters. The first images of the film feature repeated shots of handshakes, as various pairs – some of whom appear to be old friends, others who are making their introductions – shake hands, a gesture that may denote business dealings, greetings, leave takings, or congratulations, but always connotes a relation of equality and trust between the participants. The handshake thus composes its own short, repeatable rhythm and can be used to indicate other spatial practices and relations of longer duration. Other gestures that share this aspect of the handshake are then featured, with particular attention paid to gesticulation in conversation and the waving of children (sometimes at each other, more often at the camera). While the second section leaves the park behind, the perception of space it engendered in the first section is maintained as monumental and neighborhood spaces are intercut and juxtaposed in a series of sometimes pointed equivalences, as when politicians congregating outside City Hall are followed by numbers men leaning against a nondescript brick wall. The film concludes with multiple portraits of children in the park, again oriented around the use of hands as a means of connection as children are patted on the head, picked up, or hold hands crossing the street. By positing the public space of the park – as opposed to the more obvious choices of one of the great termini, Ellis Island, a government building, or a diverse neighborhood – as the center of the city and representation of its “melting pot” quality, Clarke redefines the normative mode of social relation in New York.
Clarke essentially reorients the viewer to an immanent social experience of space in Melting Pot through a focus on the tactile and its rhythms, a strategy she repeats while concentrating on the weight and unexpected playfulness of more traditional monumental structures in Bridges. Originally shot as a loop, the film was rejected by the State Department. Clarke later re-cut the footage into a three and a half minute study of Manhattan’s major bridges that found popularity both at home and abroad. Screened at Cinema 16 within a week of Ring and N.Y., the film was described as “the sensuous patterns of bridges in space.” Clarke’s study of the Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queensboro, and George Washington bridges features very few establishing shots of the bridges, and never features their termini. Instead, using extreme camera angles, zooms perpendicular to camera movement, and/or superimposition and image reversal, Clarke engulfs the viewer in a constant traversal of an itinerant space that continually shifts perspective and refuses to reach the solid ground of the other side.

The film borrows the superimposition of Ring and utilizes the same space-age electronic Barron score as Jazz, but to very different effect. The electronic notes of the score in Jazz are always cut to measure and reinforce human action, as when the tempo speeds up as commuters run up the subway steps and slows when the same scene is shot in slow motion. The score naturalizes the surreal imagery and connects it to everyday gestures and behavior, serving an almost soothing function. Clarke’s film, by contrast, famously has little connection between the score and the visuals and is often screened twice, once with the Barron score and then with the stop-gap choral score composed by Ted Mercaro. Although Mercaro’s use of a single note artificially magnified into a vocal chorus and overlaid on a jazz instrumental differs starkly from the Barrons’, its unearthliness heightens the discrepancy between the weight of the bridges and the ease of their movement around the screen.

In the Barron score, the repeated electronic beeps played in ascending or descending scales gain and decrease in speed and volume as the bridges rush smoothly
onward, depicted in a “continuous, fluid sense of motion through camera movement and overlapped images so that each shot dissolves into another.” As they once served as the voice of robots and spaceships in Forbidden Planet (Fred Wilcox, 1956), here the score functions as the bridges’ conversation, a kind of urban whale song. This anthropomorphism is anything but comforting. From 1958 onwards, reviews have focused on the film’s “perpetually disorienting effects,” but I argue that film’s disquieting affect is not the product of disorientation at all but rather of dislocation, recalling Nin’s description of Jazz. In that film, as in Bridges, it is the architecture that moves and is mistaken, not the viewer’s sense of direction – the viewer knows where he or she is, but things (the built environment) are not where they should be. The film’s power derives from the fact that its subjects – bridges – are themselves always already points of orientation, both possessed of clearly marked boundaries and themselves marking borders.

By taking the trouble to select particularly iconic bridges and footage that suggests traversal of them, Clarke continually whets viewer expectation for the next image and for the conclusion of the journey, only to deny them, inverting the function of bridges and making them, in themselves, an inescapable and engulfing space without origin or end. (Arguably, this is simply a more artistic rendering of trying to find the exit ramp on the Lower Level of the GWB at 3 p.m. on a Friday.) The viewer is never disoriented in Bridges; one always knows where one is and should be next – and frustrated when he or she ends up back where he/she started. While rhythmanalysis essentially allows the practitioner at once to theorize and encounter the practices and logics of space, Bridges points out how terrifying the meeting can be. The final image is shot through a car’s window as it is finally allowed to complete its suspended traversal of the bridge, only for the road to dead end into the middle floors of the Bank of Manhattan Trust Building (40 Wall Street), which looms in the background of the shot, artificially sutured between the Woolworth Building and the City Bank-Farmers Trust Building (20
Exchange Place). This triptych stretches from frame left to frame right, the deeply saturated red of the shot lending a continuity to the structures, which appear like a giant steel picket fence, blocking off the city that waits, invisibly, behind them [figure A20]. While these buildings are all found in roughly the same vicinity, there is no vantage point from which they appear grouped together on a straight north-south or east-west axis, as they are arranged here. Rather, this shot recalls and mocks the typical panoramic postcard view of Manhattan, which attempts to encapsulate the entire island by placing such landmarks in artificially close proximity to each other. Here, the text-product city derived from the serial-centripetal view is staged again, but in such a way as to arouse the audience’s disquiet and to register as forbidding instead of as a touristic invitation to visual mastery. The thing that defeats entry into the city of spatial practices and lived experiences is the dominant representation of space as text-product – a forbidden planet.

If Bridges uses rhythm analysis to suggest the devastating results of serial-centripetal logic and the city as text-product, then Skyscraper not only analyzes the process by which that representation of space is produced, but discovers the qualities of monument and oeuvre this process can never entirely suppress. This is most evident at the film’s conclusion, when the camera settles in front of the just-completed building’s entrance to watch the ribbon cutting ceremony. Meanwhile, the field supervisor who oversaw the construction process intones on the soundtrack: “and so, another skyscraper takes its place in the city.” The end of his sentence is obscured by a burst of static on the soundtrack as the camera cuts away abruptly from the ceremony to feature a shot of an anonymous section of the building’s side, the angle of which directs the viewer’s attention to the sapling growing on the sidewalk. At the most basic level, this sonic and visual interruption undercuts the solemnity of the ceremony itself and its attempt to swath the accumulation of capital in the language of ritual. By introducing an element of bathos into the proceedings, it exposes the ceremony’s false induction of monumentality and collective work as a matter of sign instead of spatial practice. This moment does not only
function as inversion or negation, however. Moreover and more important, it produces a plural, cyclic temporal measure of space that complicates the unified, linear, and progressive rhythm narrated by The Tishman Building’s construction. The field supervisor’s words and the ribbon cutting ceremony narrate the building, and by extension the city, as a product – as the fulfillment of an expenditure of capital that will in turn generate rental revenue and facilitate commerce. The static and cut away, by contrast, gesture to the ongoing and omnipresent noisy ballet of the street and suggest that the building itself can only be apprehended through several competing scales. *Skyscraper* narrates the building as a monument-oeuvre that “takes its place” in the city, changing the cityscape and the city’s rhythms, creating new spatial practices and perceptions, itself defined and changed by the rhythms of its surroundings.

The first city symphony to use extensive voiceover since *The City* – perhaps not surprising given Willard Van Dyke’s presence as co-director – *Skyscraper* is less evocative of ciné-poetry than cinema vérité: both its soundtrack and overall structure are dominated by the opinions and memories of the construction crew responsible for assembling the building whose rise the film chronicles. In this way, the film not only reinvigorates the city-cinema connection – with the city’s status as a filmed object constantly foregrounded – but also suggests the *oeuvre* elements of both, depicting the construction of a building and the construction of a film as collective works (in this case) undertaken by largely the same personnel.57 *Skyscraper* details the demolition of an older city block and the planning and construction of the new Tishman Building, which approximated the glass and steel box profile of modernist architecture but whose pre-fabricated, modular aluminum siding hinted at the dawn of postmodern architecture.

Even as skyscrapers like the Tishman Building attest to the urban power relations required to construct the city as concept and product, they retain traces of diverse historical perceptions and experiences of space, as well as the moment of their construction, thereby producing multiple urban rhythms. *Skyscraper* attends to these
qualities while placing extreme emphasis on the building as a collective effort of creativity and participation – the dialogic qualities of monuments are rendered literal by both expressionist, gestural camerawork and the temporal dialogue that exists between the process of construction and the workers who participated in it. *Skyscraper* evinces many of the same stylistic elements as the other experimental symphonies and uses them to the same ends. However, the film also marshals a tactic more familiar from cinéma-vérité – having participants watch and discuss the completed film. In Clarke’s case, the screening room sequences are intercut with location footage of the construction process. The sequences are bridged by the questions, comments, and answers of the workers and field supervisor, which dominate the soundtrack throughout. Thus, *Skyscraper* assembles a particularly rich matrix of polyrhythmic bodies that continually define the gigantic mass and serialized production of the Tishman Building on a human scale and forbid the film from narrating the linear completion of the building and thereby naturalizing the concept of the city as product.

*Skyscraper* begins with a concatenation of various urban spaces that almost suggest a European City Symphony. These images are accompanied by Ted Mercaro’s jazz score and ironically literal lyrics. This overture is essentially a hymn to urban planning and the compressed time of late modernity, containing lines like: “old facades must pass away / like the horse they’ve had their day.” The lyrics, however, accompany images of a very much intact wrought iron SoHo loft and a peddler and horse making their rounds on the Lower East Side. The image and lyrics bring together the very center and margins serial-centripetal space works to separate and inverts their relation, with the image-product of the center reduced to an aural presence and the margins dominating the film’s visual track. The concept of urban modernity proposed by the lyrics are essentially undercut by the daily spatial practices Clarke captures. This overture ends with the repeated assurance that “it’s growing light the city, bright the city,” as a shadow sweeps over the entire frame before cutting to black. The film re-starts in a screening room, as
construction workers and their field supervisor view footage of themselves in the act of constructing the Tishman Building. This device effectively displaces the act of construction as an ally of the center as text-product; the film does not narrate the gradual embodiment/fulfillment of building as concept but rather the perceptions and experiences of the men who built it. Their comments help create a variety of asynchronous temporalities and subjective impressions of time that contest the relentless, modular, and linear construction process chronicled by the image track. For example, one worker remembers the day the foundation was poured as “the day I had the tooth ache.” Here, an internal, bodily rhythm that subjectifies space, time, and labor overwrites the unifying power of the construction schedule.

This kind of redefinition occurs throughout *Skyscraper*. The shots of the construction process consistently produce it both as a dialogue between the workers and their project as well as one between that project and its environs. First, the workers in the screening room have keen eyes out for a glimpse of themselves or their friends. They are endlessly rewarded, as Clarke eschews expected panorama shots in favor of close-ups and character portraits. Second, the intersection at the building’s foot is featured repeatedly. It often registers seasonal holidays, weather changes, and neighborhood events, as well as the crowds of onlookers who observe the building’s construction as entertainment. Thus, the street is never allowed to recede into a kind of static measure of distance, or abstract the crowd into a kind of geometric form. Instead, it produces alternate rhythms and spatial practices on a horizontal axis. This kind of plural rhythm analysis deepens as the building rises ever higher.

As construction reaches the twentieth floor and begins to command a view of the surrounding area, Clarke shoots through the bare girders to capture Tishman’s neighbors – specifically St. Patrick’s Cathedral and the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) – at oblique and startling angles, so that they seem framed by or perhaps erupt into the iron skeleton [figure A21]. These shots are accompanied by commentary from the workers,
who assert that “St. Pats has seen three skyscrapers come and go.” This comment both introduces the possibility of a building having a point of view and suggests a kind of urban deep time, a rhythm that combines the cyclic and linear and brings the past into the present. For its part, MOMA is intercut with images of Tishman’s much-derided aluminum siding being attached. The foreman comments, “It’s like with anything new, takes time to get used to it.” The juxtaposition suggests a connection between hated prefabricated architecture and valorized modern art. By dwelling on the monumental edifice of the MOMA building, it also shows how quickly innovation can attain the status of tradition.

The film as a whole performs a rhythmanalysis of the building’s construction and envisions a definition of “taking one’s place” in the city resonant with the monument-oeuvre. The Tishman Building takes a place in the city, thereby instituting new spatial practices, bringing a new scale to its surroundings, crafting a new tone for the neighborhood. It also instantiates a new perception of space, both in terms of the ways in which it is perceived by users and the vantage points and uses it makes possible. Taking a place in the city, the building changes the city, forbidding its reduction to image and its narration as product. At one point in Skyscraper, a construction worker watching trucks cart waste to Secaucus comments: “This will be a great city if they ever finish building it.” Clarke’s work, from Loops to Bridges to Skyscraper itself, suggests that the city must not be understood as a problem to be solved, a concept or product that can only be grasped in its perfection. Rather, she demonstrates that the city exists as an infinite complexity of rhythms, exchanges, perceptions, behaviors, and itineraries that cannot be reduced to a single image and whose greatness, if any, lies in its imperfections.

The Abandoned Island

The symphonies of the center consistently revel in “ding-dong descriptions of machinery,” whether examining the innards of the machines that make life and work in
the city possible (*Ring, N.Y., Bridges*), proposing the urban center as a kind of self-repairing machine (*Skyscraper*), or mechanizing and measuring bodily rhythms to the pace of the city (*GO!, Jazz*). Moreover, the films variously foreground specifically “cinematic” optical tricks, externalize the psychological impressions of urban subjects, or position cinema as an urban machine. That is, in these films Grierson’s *Berlin*-born nightmare of modernity displayed as the play of surfaces and the assemblage of rhythms is finally fulfilled. However, through their production contexts, exhibition locales, and above all through the spatial practices they narrate as texts, the experimental city symphonies not only avert Grierson’s nightmare, but also exceed his dreams. Grierson merely wished for a film of the city that displayed and critiqued the labor relations housed within it. The experimental city symphonies more than grant his wish by performing a rhythm analysis of those centripetal spaces that have come to signify the city as text-product and, in doing so, narrate New York itself as a monument-*oeuvre* created by and in dialogue with its citizens, producing differential space.

However, differential space varies directly with the abstract space it critiques, fractures, and reconnects to experiential space: it is historically determined. Just as some of the films’ power and impact derived from their resonance with anxieties about the loss of the monumental built environment and changing spatial practices, so too was their function eventually dulled by the end of serial-centripetal logic as the dominant concept in abstract space. That is, producing the center as a monument-*oeuvre* is only possible when it has already been conceptualized as a text-product. Edward Dimendberg, Christine Boyer, Sasskia Sassen, Edward Soja and Mike Davis all point to the mid-1960s as the end of this concept’s dominance and the occasion of a double dispersal.

First, New York literally lost several important built features of its center, suffered from increased neighborhood atomization, and began to shed population from inner city residential neighborhoods – “the city moved outward toward its boundaries.” Second, while New York certainly took on increased centrifugal aspects, the contours of its
natural space ensured that at least Manhattan would always retain the distinct borders, density, and visual display connected with serial-centripetal space, a concept that was no longer nationally dominant.

If New York is the city of late modernity, then Los Angeles is the city of postmodernity, as the cliché goes. More specifically, Dimendberg points to an early 1960s national obsession with “getting out of town” in the form of automobile culture, nuclear anxiety, and newly minted “edge cities” that depended on a horizontal, rather than vertical, logic. While New York remained the U.S. city most suited to the shorthand of panoramic textuality, it lost its capacity to signify or stand for the nation as such, becoming rather an island off the coast of America. At the same time, the production context and exhibition venues that helped constitute the films as a cycle and reinscribed their monumental narratives dispersed. Cinema 16, which had distributed and exhibited many of the films – and whose programming helped compose them as a cinematic monument – disbanded in 1963. While the World’s Fair directly following the 1958 Brussels Expo was actually held in Queens in 1964, the American pavilion had shifted its agenda, setting its sight on the space race, films that envisioned friendly connections among diverse urban and rural spaces in a global context, and the expansive vistas of Norman Bel Geddes’ updated Futurama. It was unable or unwilling to cinematically encompass the city in crisis.

Paradoxically, even as the dominance of serial-centripetal space and the effectiveness of partial structures like rhythmanalysis waned, the itineraries and views endemic to the experimental city symphonies took on a zombie-like quality, living on in myriad commercial films and viral videos. But even as the form of the experimental city symphonies lived on, divorced from its political function (and, by reproducing late modern space, arguably relating to postmodern New York as Berlin once related to Weimar Germany), the final city symphony of the postwar cycle suggested the ways in which later films might attain a differential function. With the dis-integration of serial-
centripetal logic and the iconic, textual city as a dominant form of abstract space, the methods by which city symphonies produced differential space – and indeed, what kind of films about cities retained or attained a differential capacity – necessarily changed. Where Weegee and its descendents built secret passages or performed rhythmanalysis to narrate the city as festival and monument, the last of the New York city symphonies – The Cool World (Shirley Clarke, 1964) – depicted spaces that forbid or falsified narrative, uncovering the stasis that remained at the heart of abstract space once the controlled movements of serial-centripetal logic had fled.
Notes

1 *Jazz of Lights*, 16mm, directed by Ian Hugo (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1954); *The Wonder Ring*, 16mm, directed by Joseph Cornell and Stan Brakhage (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1955); *Brussels Loops*, 16mm, directed by Shirley Clarke (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, 1957); *N.Y., N.Y.; Bridges-go-round*, DVD, directed by Shirley Clarke (1958; New York: Image Entertainment, 2009); *Skyscraper*, 16mm, directed by Shirley Clarke (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959); *GO!GO!GO!; Lights*, 16mm, directed by Marie Menken (New York: Filmmakers’ Cooperative Distribution Center, 1964).


3 ibid, 209. Bruno here invokes *Empire*, 16mm, directed by Andy Warhol (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964) as an example and describes it as a city symphony.

4 ibid, 32. Bruno’s argument in this case proceeds through etymology, tracing *habitus* to *habitate* (dwelling) and then to the Italian *abito* (dress).

5 Lefebvre, 73-78.

6 ibid, 223.

7 Dimendberg, 7-9.

8 Lefebvre, 222-24.

9 Lefebvre’s understanding of monument here comes into conflict with that of urban historians and theorists such as Christine Boyer, who argues that monuments’ primary function is their important role in the construction of a nostalgic “city of collective memory” which promotes the ongoing fragmentation of the contemporary city. Dimendberg’s definition and contextual use of “centripetal space” adheres closely to Lefebvre’s – places explicitly mentioned include Grand Central Terminal and the U.N. Building – but he tends to dwell more on their uses as representations of space.

10 Lefebvre, 75-78.

11 ibid, 205-07.

12 See especially MacDonald, *Garden*, 142-84; Beattie, 31-34.

13 Rabinovitz goes on to say that the effect of this “was to bring experimental cinema more fully within painterly discussions of Abstract Expressionism and that movement’s emphasis on new image formations that explored physiological and psychological perceptions.” This style was characteristic of much New York experimental cinema in the late 1950s. Rabinovitz, 99.


17 The exception would be the two Menken symphonies. Begun after the end of both Brussels exhibition opportunities, and, unlike Clarke’s *Skyscraper*, lacking corporate or national sponsorship, Menken’s work was not advantageously positioned to circulate within festivals. Moreover, the next large international exhibition, The New York World’s Fair of 1964-65, was dominated not by city films but by studies of global social problems or rhapsodies about outer space. See MacDonald, *Cinema 16*, 1-35; Willensky, 1-22; Mekas, 6-9.

18 “The Ian Hugo Papers,” Directors Personal and Press Files (New York: Anthology Film Archives). Reflecting its auteurist bent, all holdings at Anthology are filed under the last name of the director to whom they refer, often with original publication information removed from photocopies. These publicity notices appear on a single page, marked “Jazz Reviews.” Each mentions the name of one of the above festivals, and I assume they were drawn from exhibition catalogs. The film is also described similarly in an excerpt from the catalogue of its distributor, Film Images (17 W 60th Street, New York, NY, 10023), where it could be rented for $25 in 1965.


20 *Jazz* was also included on a list of extant and forthcoming films that its authors claimed would be “essential” for developing independent cinema’s potential for “pure personal expression” and which were to be circulated to national cinémathèques in emerging countries. The list, which also includes *Berlin*, forms the final section of a Nov. 6, 1952 document composed by The BFI, the Cinémathèque Française, and a consulting committee that included Jean Rouch, Ian Hugo, and Norman McLaren. The document, titled “The Independent Film Maker: A Case for International Action,” proposed to open alternate avenues of national communication and collaboration through independent films released through national cinémathèques. Such cinémathèques were to be tasked with promoting freedom of expression and cultural interchange beyond or in opposition to official channels. That is, the cinémathèques, and the “essential” texts exhibited therein, narrated the marginal space of the art house as an alternate site of authority and humanist discourse, in which internal and individual experiences of phenomena were used to re-orient the audience to a new experience, perception, and conception of social space. In this, the proposed cinémathèques appear consonant with the differential space of Cinema 16, where nearly all of the experimental city symphonies screened. The document in question bears the UNESCO seal, but proposes the development of another organization housed within the UN to distribute feature films to a global consortium of quasi-national cinémathèques called The International Foundation for Independent Film. Ian Hugo Papers, Director Personal and Press Files, no call number (New York: Anthology Film Archives).
Notable exhibitions in New York include an extended run at Cinema 16 in January-February 1959, a return engagement in Spring 1962, and periodic screenings at both Film Forum (beginning in 1975) and Anthology Film Archives (most recently in 2009).

Finally, the initial production and exhibition of the films coincided with the demolition of the built environment they depicted. For example, the Third Avenue El (featured in Wonder Ring) was torn down in 1955, while McKim, Mead, and White’s 1903 Pennsylvania Station (featured in N.Y.) was razed in 1964. As portions of the built environment were removed from the center – and thus ceased to function as components of the city center as text-product – they lived on only in a cinema that forcefully insisted on them as monument-oeuvre, staging the disjunction between space as a concept and experience, thereby fracturing abstract space.

Lefebvre, 117-19.

MacDonald, Cinema 16, 242.


The preservation records at Anthology Archives even include this note on the Jazz entry: “2nd level pres. importance, SB says influence Anticipation and WR.” While the abbreviations are clear enough, I also verbally confirmed their referents with Anthology archivist Robert Haller on August 3, 2009. This note, which places the lesser-known Jazz above Hugo’s signature work Bells of Atlantis (1955) in line for preservation and below even minor works by Brakhage himself, also points to the importance “personal expression” as a fore-runner of auteurist discourse played in the avant-garde scene in New York, and the way it still influences the preservation and programming activities of such institutions as Anthology.

de Certeau analyzes urban trains as both oppressive non-spaces and attends to their potential to transform place to space as metaphor, 111-131. See also Marc Augé, Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity (London: Verso, 2009).

Both films are included in Anthology Film Archive’s “essential cinema” collection and so are screened quite regularly, usually together (most recently in December 2009). Initially, however, Brakhage’s work received more exposure, becoming very popular at Cinema 16 and competing at Brussels in 1958.

MacDonald, Cinema 16, 313, 347.

Tschumi, 100.

MacDonald, Cinema 16, 339.
34 Cocking, 28; MacDonald, Garden, 164.


36 For Stewart’s claim on the visual sublime as a form of the gigantic, see 75-77.

37 ibid, 172.

38 Lefebvre, 137.

39 ibid, 128.

40 MacDonald, Garden, 163.

41 Penn Station is served by the Seventh Avenue (1,2,3) and Eight Avenue (A,C,E) lines, the westernmost in the city, which also serve Greenwich Village and the West Village. The Fifth Avenue, Lexington Avenue and Broadway lines that serve the Upper East Side and Gramercy Park areas do not stop at the station.

42 Stewart, 69.

43 ibid, 65.

44 MacDonald chronicles the film’s indebtedness to Weegee’s in detail, and claims that Menken likely saw the 1948 film at Cinema 16, Cinema 16, 167.

45 I have not been able to determine where this ceremony occurred. Water is visible at the edge of the frame, suggesting either a river side park such as those on the Upper West Side and the graduation ceremony of a local school, or Columbia’s Inwood stadium and surrounding park complex.

46 Lefebvre, 376.

47 Clarke Papers, Box 3, Folder 8. Brandon Films press pack and renter’s catalog.

48 Van Dyke recruited documentarians D.A. Pennebaker and Richard Leacock, along with experimental filmmakers like Francis Thompson, as well as Clarke, who was then best known for her dance films and works of ciné-poetry. With an assignment to depict scenes of American life in a way both intelligible and attractive to Europeans, Pennebaker traveled the country shooting footage, while back in New York Clarke completed three loops of her own, and then edited the rest of the country down into twelve loops. The finished loops were each two and a half minutes long, and depicted subject categories including housing, religion, small towns, and “the changing city,” as loop eight was advertised in the official “Films at the Fair” press release. Clarke Papers, Box 3, folder 6. Only nine of the loops have been preserved, and the original numbering does not correspond to the order in which they are complied at Madison. It is likely that “changing city” has been lost, although Madison’s loop 2, titled “Construction,” does seem to have content that might be related to it.

49 Rabinovitz, 101.
Clarke Papers, Box 3, Folder 7.

Date of Clarke’s letter of application unknown. Response from Robert Moses to Shirley Clarke, Oct. 10, 1957, Box 3F, Folder 8.

Jacobs, 89.

Lefebvre, 22.

MacDonald, 364.

Rabinovitz, 102.

ibid, 101.

This perhaps suggest a connection to Man With a Movie Camera. In addition to this relationship being somewhat ironic for a film dedicated to the celebration of the city as amalgamation of capital, Clarke’s film turns on the mutual constitution of city and cinema, rather than cinema as a decoder of the city.

Grierson, 104-07.

Dimendberg, 171-248; Boyer, 421-52; Sassen, 22-35; Edward Soja, Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places (London: Blackwell, 1996); Mike Davis, City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles (London: Verso, 1990). Davis and Soja are both dealing almost exclusively with Los Angeles, but I have included them here because their analysis of the political pressures and social shifts that led to the intension development of Los Angeles as centrifugal space helps add historical context to the end of serial-centripetal space beyond New York and demonstrates why the horizontal city has come to dominate the nation’s geography.

Dimendberg, 176.


See especially Manhattan; Gangs of New York, DVD, directed by Martin Scorsese (New York: Miramax, 2002); 25th Hour, DVD, directed by Spike Lee (New York: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2003); the opening credits of Angels in America, DVD, directed by Mike Leigh (New York: HBO, 2004); Shortbus, DVD, directed by John Cameron Mitchell (New York: Think Film, 2006). Giuliana Bruno cites several videos produced in connection with the December, 2002 “tribute in light” to the World Trade Center, Public Intimacy, 207-08. There are countless YouTube and other viral videos that use similar logics and views, but for particularly widely viewed examples see “New York City HD Timelapse,” YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPELWmTc2E8; “New York City High Definition,” YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JDTkPU-sWk&feature=related.
American city films look upon the past as a valuable era of authentic human experience and emotion – pleasure and pain, associated not with just any space but with New York City as an icon of modernity … the traumatic social reality of one generation becomes the comforting myth of the next.

Mark Shiel, “A Nostalgia for Modernity”

Shirley Clarke’s *Skyscraper* concludes with a musical number called “My Manhattan.” The song accompanies images of the Tishman Building from a variety of angles and different times of day. The song plays on the double nature of “my,” which intimates both the limitations constituted by an embodied subjectivity (“my Manhattan is not your Manhattan”) and a sense of the urban experience as a possession. At the same time, the images demonstrate the continuing changes of light, atmosphere, and environment to which an allegedly complete building is subject. Together, they suggest that the city is a perpetual work in progress that engenders both a subjective experience of the city and an ownership of it – that is, produces the city as an oeuvre. Clarke’s next city symphony – *The Cool World* (1964), the study of several days in the life of a Harlem teenager and his neighborhood – begins and ends with a long voiceover that could also be titled “My Manhattan” or perhaps “My Harlem.” Spoken by Duke, the 14-year-old leader of a Harlem street gang, the monologue describes his driving desire: to acquire a gun, thereby winning the right to produce certain spatial practices, deriving from them a secure identity as an authority in his neighborhood, acknowledged as such by all who he encounters. The first time Duke delivers this monologue, it accompanies a series of shots of sidewalk crowds, all of whom seem to ignore, or even to laugh at, its originator. The second time, Duke delivers it having committed murder, seated in the back of a cop car.
headed downtown, never to see Harlem again or produce any spatial practice but those delineated by the prison system.

Not only is Manhattan manifestly not Duke’s due to his racial and socio-economic oppression, but the doubling of the monologue also produces the film as a kind of sterile loop in which no mutually constitutive play of rhythms between citizens and the built environment is possible. Rather than the multiple rhythms that make up Skyscraper and allow for the narration of the city as a progressive process that culminates as unfinished work, the endless, unfulfilled repetition of Duke’s movements in pursuit of his goal and the film’s circular structure cause the city to emerge here as undone. In Cool World, the city cannot be possessed, it cannot be subjectified, and it cannot be narrated as differential space. This is because the representation of space against which these tactics inveigh, which is to say the abstract space of late modernity conceptualized through the serial-centripetal model, no longer exists. It has been replaced by a space at once undifferentiated, omnipresent, and imperviousness to physical manifestation, a space that forbids clear representation of its power relations or a rational encounter among place, time, and subjectivity: the space of postmodernity and of the crisis-city.

Noël Carroll describes The Cool World as “a New York travelogue.” Paula Massood understands it as combining the tropes of the gangster film with “documentary realism (influenced by cinema vérité and direct cinema) and the rhythmic editing patterns of the city symphony to present Harlem life in the early sixties.” But The Cool World did more than simply incorporate the editing schemes or visual style of the city symphony into an otherwise fictional text of the New American Cinema. I argue that the Cool World – produced at the same moment the master builder of serial-centripetal urban planning lost power, the primary distributor and exhibitor of city symphonies disbanded, the margins erupted, the center eroded, and New York ceded its pride of place in the national imaginary to other cities – is the symphony of a city in the midst of an existential crisis. That is, “the City” that the late modern New York city symphonies addressed,
challenged, and fractured – the representation of space that the films redefined as a series of irreducible spatial practices and, through the partial structures of secret passages and rhythm analysis, narrated as differential space – is no longer extant as the dominant form of abstract space. A change in abstract space demands a concomitant change in differential tactics. Just as earlier city symphonies contested the infinite formal differences of a city in which each space was reduced to a sign and thus an endlessly legible fragment of the urban problem, *Cool World* contends with a city completely resistant to narration, in which every space is both margin and center and equally forbids an experience or conceptualization of space. Just as earlier symphonies used the partial structures of rhythm analysis or secret passages to produce differential space from the serial-centripetal logic of late modern abstract space, *Cool World* uses the partial structure of falsifying narrative to excavate the crisis logic constitutive of the abstract space of postmodernity. *Cool World* marks the end of the post-war New York city symphony cycle, suggests the nature of the new abstract space with which future symphonies must engage, and proposes new tactics by which differential space may be produced.

**A City in Amber and Darkness**

By positioning *Cool World* as the hinge between late modern and postmodern New York city symphonies, I duplicate the dominant periodization of the postwar New York city symphony cycle, but differ sharply from the spatial trajectory of most canonic accounts of city symphonies as a transhistorical form. That is, scholars like Scott MacDonald and Keith Beattie argue that the end of the New York cycle in 1964 was consonant with the rise of polynucleotide postmodern cities, and therefore turn their critical attention to sites like Los Angeles, Mexico City, and Tokyo. Likewise, Edward Dimendberg argues that serial-centripetal space gave way to diffuse, horizontal, decentralized centrifugal space that could not be depicted as a unified whole and devotes
the later parts of his study of noir to Los Angeles. Thus, in these and other studies, New York – as both cinema and built environment – freezes in time, locked into the lines of late modernity, even as the pre-postmodern history of Los Angeles evaporates, transcribed to the eastern seaboard. The critical tradition reduces individual, constantly evolving cities – contemporary New York, for example, is just as typical of centrifugal, unevenly developed, atomized postmodern space as Los Angeles is – to iconic shorthands for and products of a specific, historically limited, relation of production.

Mark Shiel demonstrates that the conflation of New York with (late) modernity and Los Angeles with postmodernity is not only endemic in film studies and the humanities more generally, but also in visual culture. Moreover, he argues that the construction of New York as a nostalgic, intact late modernity was a compliment to the postmodern presentation of New York as a failed city caught in an endless spiral of social, civic, and racial disasters. When reduced to an icon of modernity, New York functions in one of two ways in cinema. Either it takes on the nostalgic sheen of an embodied, reified modernity and the particular relations among place, time, and persons that this implies, or its loss of power to poly-nucleated post-metropolii is explained through a narrative of hubris-filled rise and fall:

New York’s ascendant trajectory from the 1930s to the 1960s collapsed in the notorious abyss of racial conflict, rising crime, urban dilapidation, brutalist architecture, and financial ruin into which the city fell in the later 1960s and 1970s … New York, first and foremost of all cities, came to appear in social commentary and popular culture as the most telling barometer of a generalized social rot.

As Shiel’s evocation of the “abyss” suggests, if serial-centripetal late modern New York was characterized by an excessive vision, then the New York of postmodernity was conceived as a catastrophic loss of vision that was tantamount to the loss of the ability to concatenate and rationalize space, to occupy the present and construct a future. Although serial-centripetal space was composed by an exterior vantage, it was one that regarded New York as a product and as a center, as generating the relations of production that
allowed for the composition of such a vantage point and concept-pyramid in the first place. By contrast, the abyss of postmodernity must not be mistaken for the labyrinth. The labyrinth exceeds vision by slipping below its threshold, allowing for the production of spatial practices that negotiate the city’s surfaces intimately and immanently. The abyss, forbidding the envisioning or conception of the city, also forbids the production of spatial practices: the abyss is a blind view composed not by regarding the city from an exterior locus but by forgetting it, relegating it to the status of irresolvable crisis and to the past.

The abyss is neither a pyramid nor a labyrinth. Serial-centripetal logic produced the city as a problem viewed from the pyramid, and partiality in response produced it as a series of secret passages or rhythms composed within the labyrinth, but the abyss produces it as a crisis. As a crisis-city, New York is the sign of urban failure, whether as a metonymy for the American urban crisis in general or as a sign for the lost centripetal city of late modernity. It can no longer stand for itself, but is rather finally reduced to the static modern/disaster The City attempted and failed to produce it as. In the abyss, spatial practices are impossible, always already reduced to asynchronous signs of the longed-for past or doomed future. The postmodern abyss finally produces a space that cannot be narrated, one so totally abstract that experiences and concepts of space can no longer be composed, let alone re-linked to produce differential space. In the abyss of the crisis-city, the strategies of rhythmanalysis and secret passages are no longer sufficient to produce spaces that narrate an alternative social order. Producing differential space from the abyss cannot simply proceed by constructing spatial practices but must rather excavate this abstract space, demonstrating the irrationalities and impossibilities of experience and concept on which this space is founded and which it deflects through nostalgia or the evocation of social problems. Postmodern New York city symphonies can only produce differential space by using falsifying narration.
In *Cinema 2: The Time Image* Gilles Deleuze describes a state of affairs in which “the time is out of joint,” time and movement are no longer linked, and space completely exceeds any descriptive capacity. Deleuze argues that such spaces have been completely emptied of meaning or the ability to ground characters and actions, and instead present as “any-space-whatever,” constantly on the verge of being created and/or destroyed, and incapable of hosting any experience of space other than the banal reduced to a spectacle or traumatizing, paralyzing exceptions. Deleuze’s description is evocative of the abyss of the crisis-city. In fact, when Deleuze elucidates the types of narrative possible in such spaces, he explicitly discusses 1960s New York and, among others, the films of Shirley Clarke. In any-space-whatever, narration as a system of judgment “according to legal connections in space and chronological relations in time” – such as those composed by late modern New York city symphonies – is no longer possible, and must instead accede to the powers of the false. Falsifying narration first of all destabilizes identity; Deleuze argues that the difference between author and character is dissolved by Clarke in *The Connection* (1962) and *Portrait of Jason* (1967). The difference between character and city is similarly troubled by Clarke in *Cool World* through typical tactics of false narration such as irrational cuts and false continuity. These stage the disjunction between characters’ ability to witness and act, cast doubt on the existence of a unified present, and create ambiguity between characters and their environment, fiction and nonfiction, and subjective and objective points of view.

By tracing the frontier between self and other and self and city, gesturing to contradictory presents and shared pasts, relentlessly exploring the irrational connections between locations, and probing the absolute gaps within locations, *Cool’s* falsifying narrative allows for the excavation of the abyss. When experiential and conceptual space have already been conjoined and congealed, abstract space can only be fractured by pointing out the irrationalities and impossibilities that structure it, by making manifest on the ground the relations of production that are otherwise tangible only as signs. Thus,
falsifying narrative produces differential space by structuring spatial practices that point out the mutual exclusion of witness and actor, space as an experience and concept as conditions shared by director and character, center and margin, body and environment. *Cool World* demonstrates the ways that “the city in crisis,” usually tied to social problems and spaces of difference such as Harlem, is instead a product of the completely alienated relations of production that structures all urban space – including areas usually articulated as nostalgic icon, such as Midtown. At the same time, the film refuses to produce New York as a perpetual late modern space, concentrating instead on the ways in which the spatial practices and social order of that period – and the ability to derive one’s own identity from a perception and conceptualization of them – are no longer extant.

This production is largely indebted to the film’s setting in Harlem, an area that once functioned not only as a space of difference for Caucasian New York, but also as a center – and a monument-œuvres – for the African American community.9 The Harlem of 1964’s crisis-city, however, is almost diametrically opposed to the 1940’s Harlem of serial-centripetal space. At the most basic level, Harlem’s qualities as a spatial goal – as collecting space, as a place to which one could accede – were reversed as the long-established middle class left for high rises on the Upper East Side, Brooklyn, or inner-ring suburbs. Pamela Wojick argues that the 1964 rent riots simply helped crystallize what had been a gestating critique – circulating in both black and white publications – of Harlem as a perpetually poor area thinned of both its history and the social groups and bonds that would allow it to produce a different future.10 The Harlem of 1964, then, was not simply a space of difference or a margin. Rather, it was a fallen capital in which not the past but rather the loss of its potential hovered over a thinned-out, entirely cyclic present that could not be escaped and could not be visualized, a dual monument-œuvre and secret passage reduced to any-space-whatever. Harlem was thus paradigmatic of New York as an abyssal crisis-city even as it was invoked as a social problem to obscure the relations of production that composed the postmodern city as a crisis.
The Cool World: The City Is a Liar

Clarke’s _Cool World_ concerns a few weeks in the life of 14-year-old Richard “Duke” Custis (Hampton Clanton), would-be leader of the Royal Pythons street gang, and his quest to obtain a gun in time for a rumble with the rival Wolves. This deadline narrative plays out in Harlem, with excursions to Central Park, Wall Street, and Coney Island. The first feature-length film shot entirely on location in Harlem, _Cool_ was marketed through an auteurist discourse constructed around Clarke and as a particularly “authentic” social problem film. In recent critical literature it is better known for its mixture of documentary (specifically vérité) and avant-garde tactics, which both skillfully capture large swathes of Harlem street life and suggest, through impressionist style and editing discontinuities, an experience of the space filtered through Duke’s point of view.

However, the street scenes and the point of view sequences are discontinuous. The street scenes produce Harlem and other city spaces as they are, anonymous, alienating any-space-whatever that occupy a totalizing, inescapable present. For example, each section ends with a whip pan that returns the viewer and Duke to the same doorway he left at the start of the section. Spatial practices are limited and constantly repeated, unchanging from day to day. By contrast, Duke can engage with the city only in the past or in the future. For example, his fantasies of leadership and his usually friendly, protective interactions with other youth figures – particularly a college-bound basketball player – suggest that he longs to be a gangster, enmeshed in an aspirational, only somewhat predatory entrepreneurial structure that helps weave the community together, rather than a gang member. Massood suggests that such a construction of criminality is much more consonant with the Harlem of the 1930s than of the 1960s and aligned with the modern and late modern construction of the area as a locus of modernity and community rather than the postmodern construction of the area as a ghetto. At the same time, Duke refuses to articulate the rather depressing, boring, anonymous future his
present spatial practices – going to school, selling cigarettes, hanging out in the Python clubhouse – are likely to produce. Instead, he obsessively focuses on the alternative future that will be ensured if he acquires a gun.

Like any good rhythm-analyst, Duke is able to view and construct alternative temporal orders and perceive several divergent linear and cyclic rhythms at play in the same space, tracing the connections that lead from the ground zero of his own body’s rhythms and desires to the built environment and the social order. But where rhythm-analyses of serial-centripetal space allows the analyst to construct a mutually constitutive relationship between the self and the environment, Duke’s rhythm-analyses of the crisis-city produces false rhythms. That is, in his production of Harlem as a nostalgic icon of late modernity, Duke essentially ejects himself from the current production of space. He can – mentally and physically – occupy and act in the space of a vanished past or the space of an impossible future, but not the space of the present. *Cool* essentially stages a collision between the impotent serial-centripetal city Duke dreams and the invisible crisis-city he can’t quite inhabit, questioning and undoing the “truths” of points of view and spatial relations composed in each sequence with the images of the next, thereby critiquing postmodern abstract space and dismissing a nostalgia for late modernity as an effective tactic for negotiating that space.

*Cool World* opens with an extreme close-up of a street-corner preacher delivering a sermon on the subject of “the black man as the original man” directly to the camera [figure A22]. This shot is followed by a short, two-minute sequence in which the rest of the speech is overlaid with quick glimpses of the surrounding neighborhood and its figures, including young mothers, older corner men, and white police officers. Other than the first shots of the preacher, each shot approaches its subject at a slight angle, with subjects glancing up, or over their shoulders to meet the camera before looking down or away as the camera quickly pans right or left to cut to the next face. The exception is the police, who are shot from a lower angle and who stare directly at the camera, in one case
mimicking the rightward sweep of the pan as though following the camera out of frame. The sequence ends when one of the residents approached looks up at the camera, turns, smiles, and greets it: “hey Ron.” A reverse shot reveals Ron – a minor figure in the Pythons who has little to do with the unfolding of the plot he now exposits in conversation with Duke – and suggests that the preceding moments, apparently recorded by an objective documentary camera, have in fact expressed Ron’s subjective (and fictional) point of view. At the same time, however, the constant volume of the preacher’s harangue contests this reading, and reminds the viewer not only of the film’s constructed status but of a seeming divide between the aural and visual negotiation of space. Similarly, when Clarke finally provides an establishing shot of the street, Ron’s itinerary should describe a unidirectional path but the false continuity of the left-right pans describes a circular path, gesturing to the alienated, impassable nature of space and the difficulty of individuated, purposeful spatial practices in the abyss of the crisis-city.

Massood reads this sequence as a kind of symphonic prelude to the rest of the film, laying out the typical texture of a Harlem street and evoking its potential to enable events before settling into an updated – or deconstructed – gangster narrative familiar from independent African American cinema.14 This opening is not, however, the superimposition of documentary authenticity over a genre-based narrative. Rather, this sequence creates several simultaneous and contradictory subject positions. Where the opening frames of Jazz place Times Square within the cinema, Cool World places the film within the city and establishes a broken rhythm. Lauren Rabinovitz reads the shot as both a kind of shock or antagonism aimed at the majority-white audiences of the art houses and festivals at which the film first played and as an affirmation directed toward the black youth audience Clarke particularly wanted to cultivate.15 The first shot can also be read retroactively from Ron’s point of view as an interruption. The quick pans, oblique angles, and sense of scanning evoked by the opening sequence as a whole suggest that it conveys Ron’s search for Duke. The camera doubles as the practiced sleuthing eye of the
urban dweller, who must sift through the sensory ensemble of the street to detect his goal. Here, the first shot catches the off-screen Ron in mid-step, and its close-up scale is actually a redoubling of the preacher’s volume. Hearing is the first sense extended in the urban context, and the loud volume of the preacher’s shout represents one of those breaks in self-generated bodily rhythm and focus that can startle any city pedestrian into a visual encounter with an otherwise overlooked aspect of the street.16 The close-up is actually a reverse shot and a re-framing, the result of the rack-focus forced on Ron’s scanning of the street. The broken shot-reverse shot, the shot that only reveals itself in retrospect to be half of an exchange of glances, or fails/hesitates to depict a character who should be present, is a hallmark of false narration.17

Just as the opening shot disrupts Ron’s search (and the story that has not yet been represented on screen as plot), the rest of the sequence details the visual regime and representations of space that determine Ron’s spatial practices in the crisis-city. For example, although Ron perhaps does not directly meet the police officer’s gaze – the angle suggests he is glancing up from beneath his hat – they unblinkingly “eyeball” him, keeping their attention on Ron/the camera even after he has ceased to regard them. Carroll argues that this sequence, and similar ones associated with Duke’s thoughts later on, are “difficult to fit into the story. They don’t seem to be point of view shots … they seem to almost float into the film, shards of fact related to, but unfettered by, the story.”18 That is, while Cool World borrows or updates several of its tactics – specifically the use of voiceover, extended point of view shots, and a mixture of scripted and unscripted footage – from another city symphony with scripted, fictional content, On the Bowery, it nearly inverts the relationship the earlier film established between story and fact. If, as Kracauer says, On the Bowery’s fictional core acts like a magnet, attracting and organizing various real-life episodes, in Cool World the polarity is reversed: fictional content constantly rejects the reality that surrounds it, content that asserts itself as
documentary is revealed to be fictional, and the protagonist refuses to speak for or be associated with the community he (in some ways) typifies.

Thus, because *Cool World* is a city symphony of the urban crisis, and a space that narrates by falsifying, the opening sequence and others like it are actually indicative of the troubled relation between documentary and fiction, any-space-whatever and character-witnesses, in general. For example, here the opening shots purport to be an objective street scene, but are actually a point of view sequence. Moreover, they enact a literal “search” for the story on Ron’s part that records, without comment, the power relations that determine what kinds of stories can be told, and what their likely outcome will be. Finally, the continued rightward pans that connect shots suggest that Ron’s attempt to walk down the street, negotiating the grid, is continually subverted by the constant cyclic movements of Harlem itself as social space. Finally, because Ron is essentially a non-character whose one function is to motivate Duke’s first verbalization of his wish for a gun (and thus the plot), he almost functions as an extension of space itself – of space that enables events, which Massood argues is a hallmark of Harlem-set films. But where the space Massood describes enables events by contextualizing them in a social order, Clarke’s Harlem enables only either banality and boredom or extraordinary trauma by its lack of a coherent spatial order. Ambiguity between individuals and the collective and/or the built environment, desired spatial practices and constraining representations of space, a falsifying camera that appears to narrate objectively only to reveal a subjective origin, and space that collapses in on itself, structure the rest of the film.

This is particularly evident in the sequence immediately following the opening. Duke and Ron wander across the street to seek out local racketeer Priest and his girlfriend, who shows them the gun (in a slow motion shot) as Priest names his price for it to Duke. The freshmen then walk around the corner to the school bus that will take them on their end of the year school trip to Wall Street. The long, fluid tracking shots that
connect Duke’s progress across space have the effect of rendering each stop on their itinerary, each event, equal and directly related. So, hanging out before school leads directly to window-shopping for a gun, which precedes a trip to the heart of capitalism; the banal and the extreme are one and the same and begin to redefine each other. The editing renders these events and their connections logical, equivalent, and natural, suppressing the semiotics of genre and morality that usually separate them while revealing the power relations and representations of space that organize Duke’s particular spatial practices.

As Duke boards the bus, the combination of his first voice over – which becomes a crucial aspect of the film’s structure – and the preponderance of shots directed out of the bus window place the audience within Duke’s experience, perception, and conception of space. Duke recalls a conversation with his Aunt, in which he described his current behavior and future prospects – working in a liquor store – to her. This recollection occurs in the present tense, and includes both Duke’s voice and his Aunt’s, who is never seen in the film. Immediately after recalling the interaction, Duke dismisses it as a series of lies on his part: “shit. Work in a liquor store? Don’t she know? What I need and what I want is a gun … Duke Custis, leader of the Pythons.” Even an interior monologue is not particularly trustworthy. In fact, both halves of Duke’ thoughts recount equally phantasmatic futures; the employed “Richard” Duke constructs for his Aunt is just as imaginary as the identity he dreams for himself. Furthermore, it is an identity – “There goes Duke, he’s cool! Yeah, he’s a real cool killer” – completely based on the perceptions and reactions of others. The non-existence of this identity, the indifference of Duke’s environment to his desires, and his dependence on it for the definition of his own spatial practices, is suggested by the street activity the bus passes by. Against the aural track of Duke’s self-fashioning, the visual track records groups of young adults talking with their backs to the street, children waving to their friends on the bus, and older gang members pointing and laughing at the spectacle. Thus, the passing streetscape outside,
shot as though from Duke’s point of view, does not represent a “fragment of reality” floating into the film, but rather Duke’s passive witnessing of that reality and his inability to act within it to align his projected identity with the space required to validate it. This sequence’s play of indifference and engagement underscores the protagonist’s unfulfilled wish for the ability to make the outside reflect the inside, to make his future flesh through his environment’s acknowledgement of him, to construct his identity from this space, as late modern Harlem would once have allowed him to do.

Only after the camera has fully aligned itself with a subjectivity shown to be not so much unreliable as nonsynchronous – Duke both wants a milieu that reacts to what he will be instead of what he is and desires the kind of relation between subject and place that no longer exists – do the credits finally appear, as the bus passes through Central Park. Again, the spatial narrative spills its borders, as the credits follow the motion of the bus, and appear to be nothing more than the white light glimpsed between the dark leaves of the trees in the park. Thus, when Cool World exits the park and leaves “the cool world” for the urban center, it does so wrapped in Duke’s subjectivity and oriented to the spatial practices of Harlem. The center it emerges into is just as fanciful and just as much an empty play of signs as Duke’s Harlem. Mr. Shapiro, the white teacher, describes the sights of midtown and downtown in a manner both overly literal and inaccurate. For example, he points to various hotels and stores and names them, citing their “richness,” without ever attempting to explain the larger significance of the area or the particular power and history of retail and real estate in New York. Both use value and exchange value are completely evacuated from the built environment, revealing capital accumulated to the point it becomes a sign. In later shots, he identifies Rockefeller Plaza as Radio City, claims that the New York Public Library is the largest in the world (it’s not), and concludes that “they put big wreathes around the lions at Christmas” (they do).

Most critical accounts describe the field trips in terms of the students’ obvious disinterest in and alienation from white areas of capital, spectacle, and politics. As
notable, however, is the teacher’s bad narration of the space. In Mr. Shapiro’s hands, the urban center becomes not even a product but the signs of products, each interchangeable or reducible to a whimsical detail, important only as signs of signs – the biggest, the richest, the oldest. As Duke and his classmates finally arrive in Wall Street, the vertiginous camera evokes the area as a concrete prison, performing an unceasing circular pan of the area before a quick, nearly invisible cut spins to a stop in Harlem in a shot that depicts Duke leaning against his mother’s front door. Here, a shot that initially suggested Duke’s point of view ends up including him, in the kind of impossible 360-degree pan that Bazin connects to the intertwining of subjectivity and environment and Deleuze to falsifying narration. The field trip and its resolution again traces the faltering line between self and city and reinscribes the inescapable nature of Harlem: throughout the film, any trip to another space ends with an unmotivated cut back to the neighborhood. It also suggests that, as an any-space-whatever in which experience, perception, and conception of space are mutually exclusive, Harlem is not an exceptional space in crisis but rather utterly typical of New York as a whole as an abyssal crisis-city. The city’s state results from an overarching production of space rather than social problems per se.

The extended sequence set in Coney Island makes the status of Harlem as a typical, rather than aberrant, space in the crisis-city particularly evident, even as it also suggests Cool World’s hybrid fiction-nonfiction mode as emblematic of the difficulties of narrating the crisis-city. Like Harlem, Coney once served as an alternative center, a storied space of leisure, a place of mass gathering and economic accomplishment – and, in Weegee’s New York, a narration of the city as an assemblage of the citizenry organized by the relation of being together with strangers. Duke and his girlfriend, Luanne (Yolanda Rodriguez), visit Coney to fulfill what Duke interprets as her wish to see the ocean. The sequence begins with the camera following the characters out of the Stillwell Avenue subway tunnel and onto the Boardwalk, as one of the film’s few panoramic long shots reveals a dirty, nearly empty, decrepit stretch of beach. Luanne and Duke approach
the concessions on the Boardwalk, first immediately encountering and hustling an
acquaintance from Harlem and then turning their skills as a gangster and a prostitute to
their advantage as they effortlessly win each game they play. “The cool world” extends
far across 110th street, past the end of the subway, and to the ocean itself. Like every
other space, Coney is soon placed within Duke’s subjectivity, as he is drawn to a quick-
draw Western game. As in his earlier verbal fantasies, he enacts his identity as gun-
slinging hero, here mediated by the generic semantic properties of the game, which
finally addresses him as “the bad man” he wants to be. The game’s repeated injunction to
“draw” – or perhaps Duke’s memory of it – continually registers around the soundtrack,
meshing with Luanne’s laughter, as Duke excels at other games. The camera pushes in to
a board covered in balloons and then cuts to Duke looking to his side – to find empty
space where he expected Luanne to be.

Luanne’s disappearance has been discussed as a kind of narrative short circuit or
dead end, as an implied motive for Duke’s self destructive behavior at the film’s end, or
even as an instance of Cool World’s refusal of traditional continuity editing. Moreover,
it is possible to interpret Luanne’s laughter – the only evidence of her presence in the film
for several minutes before her absence is revealed – as part and parcel of Duke’s fantasy
of his future self. Having reduced Luanne to the validation of his longed-for identity, he
finally loses all traces of her real physical presence as well. At the same time, Luanne’s
disappearance, which is arguably the most “realistic” or least generically determined
element of the film, harkens back to the most overt “fictional” content in Berlin, that of
the woman driven to suicide by her misreading of modernity.

The editing of the sequence suggests that Luanne disappears into the irrational
relations and discontinuities that pepper both Cool World’s formal structure and the space
of the crisis-city itself. She simply falls into a gap between cuts, between the film as a
fictional genre narrative and a nonfiction city symphony, or between the sky and sea,
escaping into or consumed by space itself. In contrast to Berlin’s woman on the bridge –
who dies because she refuses to parse modern space as microcosm – Luanne disappears because she understands perfectly the nature of the space through which she moves. Luanne is the only character who gets what they want in the film because she has the only accurate understanding of the possibilities left in the crisis-city. Critics invariably claim that Luanne wants to see the ocean. In fact, narrating her wish to Duke, she simply says that she wants to go away, traveling as far as possible, until she gets to the end of America in San Francisco, where “they have an ocean.” The ocean is not something Luanne wants to see, it marks a litmus or limit she wants to approach in her movement toward the frontier, the end of known space.22 The ocean is completely undifferentiated space and thus not recoverable as a representation of space, representational space, or spatial practice. It marks the ends of spatial orders without itself being marked, except as unknowable.

In fact, when Luanne finally reaches the shoreline, she gazes at the horizon and plans her next escape: “what happens when you get to the end? To that line out there?” Duke, whose movements through space are propelled by goals he can’t achieve, answers “Europe.” Luanne, however, doesn’t quite believe him, asks what’s past that, and keeps her eyes on the horizon for the remainder of the scene. Luanne’s desires compose an impossible spatial practice that the film, as a false narrative, is finally able to grant. Wanting only to reach “the end,” the line and gap that recedes as one approaches, the only true experience or concept of space left in the abyss of the crisis-city, she finally slips between another ephemeral line – the one between shots. The Coney sequence finally ends as Duke, exhausted from his search, turns away from the beach, down the empty boardwalk, disappears at the end of the dark street, and emerges in the next shot walking from the edge of the lower center of the frame up his front steps [figure A23, figure A24]. Just as the reveal of Ron’s point of view prompted a revaluation of subjectivity and objectivity in the opening sequence, Luanne’s vanishing makes Duke’s emergence back in Harlem a kind of miracle while simultaneously casting doubt on the
veracity of each previous cut between spaces. It also suggests the existence of spaces beyond the film’s capacity to depict.

The film ends with Duke once again attempting to narrate Harlem in harmony with his own impossible future self, to conjoin witness and action, a concept of space and its experience. Instead of an implied point of view, here Duke literally dreams the street sequence that accompanies his musings; he is pictured at the start and end of the sequence lying on his bed looking at a blank wall. However, the loss of Luanne has caused him to lose control of even his own mental space, and his description of his abandonment of his own story – “I ain’t even got the heart for the rumble now” – is cross cut with images of happy families and couples, a future he had not previously even thought of (previously absent from both his voiceover and the image track) and which is now out of his reach. Finally, the rumble comes, and Duke finds a knife sufficient to kill the leader of the Wolves. As Duke runs down the street, the camera finally records Harlem’s monumental structures – the Apollo and the intersection at Lennox Avenue and 125th Street – but Duke’ voice is conspicuously absent from the soundtrack. Having finally achieved the act that should trigger his “cool” status, he encounters places associated with the Harlem of late modernity capable of granting this identity, but Duke cannot even turn his head to regard them, and the lights shine on him indifferently.

The final sequence details Duke’ arrest. As he awaits the police, the crime for which he will be arrested is narrated on the radio, broadcasting his deeds far and wide – to an indifferent audience, who are not given his name, but only his age and race, and are then excitedly told about plans to bury a copy of the Constitution on the moon. Like Luanne, Duke too – or at least his projection of himself – is swallowed by an unknowable space. As the credits roll over Duke being taken downtown in a patrol car, the end of his first voiceover is replayed. The film has become a loop – Duke going downtown and recounting his future exploits – and spilled out beyond its fictional borders. The final words, “stay cool,” are uttered as the car passes into Midtown, effectively reinforcing
Harlem’s status as the paradigm of, not exception to, New York, and functioning as an injunction to the audience. The final lines remind them that they, too, share a part of Duke’s space as occupants of the abyssal crisis-city.

New York, I Love You but You’re Bringing Me Down

Like the symphonies of the margins, *The Cool World* follows the spatial practices of embodied individuals. A single-location symphony like *Bowery* uses this tactic to outline the diverse rhythms at play in an allegedly “dead” area, to suggest the rules and relations that govern such areas, and to emphasize both the difference from and connections of the center’s relations of production to those occupying the “eddies” of the urban river. By contrast, *Cool World* continually complicates point of view sequences, intimating that there is no objective position available to the viewer and casting doubt on Duke’s ability to simultaneously experience and conceptualize space while rendering the distinctions between the built environment, the community, and the individual obscure. Like the symphonies of the center, *Cool World* posits cinema as an urban technology of rhythmanalysis. A film like *Jazz* places a space within the cinematic apparatus to suggest the possibility of narrating the center as an *oeuvre* and of constructing a more capacious and accurate understanding of urban rhythms. By contrast, *Cool World* foregrounds the language and apparatus of cinema in order to probe the irrationality of space and the impossibility of marking it as a work or producing a link between one’s own bodily rhythms and those of the built environment. Instead of being contained by the film or understood as the production of a cinematic perception, space bleeds out around the traditional borders of the credits and points out the continuity of the allegedly singular and separate “cool world” with both the rest of the cinematic city and the spatial practices the cinema-goer herself produces. By borrowing from both city symphony traditions, *Cool* maintains the specificity of the historical African American urban experience and of Harlem as a representation of space, representational space, and spatial practice while
continually connecting Harlem to the rest of city. Thus, *Cool World* both registers the racism and economic predations of the space of consumption that forbid Duke from negotiating or inhabiting space beyond the confines of “the cool world” and also suggests the ways in which these locations are themselves uninhabitable, alienating any-spaces-whatever.

*Cool World* has been criticized by film scholars for its political failings. Carroll claims that it primarily seeks to “expose” the problems of Harlem teens to good-willed white audiences and does not engage in particularly radical rhetoric.23 Rabinovitz notes that the film represents an African American urban milieu largely absent from the contemporary commercial cinema and, in doing so, constructs a range of modes of discourse produced in that milieu that complicate the usual discourse of white liberalism. Nevertheless, *Cool World* admits for no solution to any of the problems of racial or gender-based oppression it outlines.24 These critiques are valid, but what they miss is that the film’s lack of rhetorical or political alternatives emanate from the particular spatial narrative of the crisis-city. *Cool World* produces a New York from which there is literally no escape because the city’s extant representation of space is so undifferentiated that it turns spatial practices into spatial paradoxes and the only representational space or perception of space that renders the city livable must cast it into the past to do so. *Cool World* moves beyond the “social problem film” to demonstrate the ways in which Harlem’s characteristics as any-space-whatever are not constitutive of a social problem or crisis but rather derive from the representations of space that produce New York as perpetually out of joint, either an inescapable disaster or a frozen memento. The film cannot proffer revolutionary alternatives because there is no extant space from which to stage a revolution.25 A revolution must first produce its own space – a point perhaps embedded in the riots that swept Harlem in April 1964 a few months after *Cool’s* release. While the 1943 riots followed the public attack of a black soldier by a white cop, engaging the public space of the city as an extension of the nation and its direct power
structure, the 1964 riots were sparked by rocketing increases in rent. The 1964 riots, then, follow from literal or figurative evictions from one’s own private space, from the home that Lefebvre argues is that last bastion of absolute space in modernity.\textsuperscript{26}

By crafting irrational continuities and filtering them through a protagonist who cannot act and witness at the same time and whose perceptions complicate the boundaries between audience and camera, subjectivity and objectivity, human body and built environment, \textit{Cool World} is able to finally step outside the trap of the abyssal crisis-city, which cannot be conceptualized and cannot be experienced because it consists of nothing but un-narratable space. In doing so, Deleuze argues, Clarke “films the frontier,” renegotiating the relation between self and other, self and space, and rendering the conditions that sever them visible.\textsuperscript{27} That is, as Louis Marin argues travelogues sometimes can, she glimpses the limit, the neutral space that is semiotically negative, neither this nor that. The frontier is at once completely mental and completely experiential, and, like the space Luanne enters when she leaves the film, forbids representation while acting as a placeholder for what is presently unfigurable – in this case, a social order outside of the crisis-city, and beyond the current supremacist system, that does not have recourse to a nostalgia for modernity.\textsuperscript{28}

In \textit{Cool World}, Clarke combines avant-garde, documentary, and fictional tactics to falsify spatial narratives in a crisis-city that otherwise forbids narration and, in doing so, suggests the ways in which future New York city symphonies might produce differential space within postmodernity. That is, \textit{Cool World} suggests that postmodern city symphonies in New York can encompass more than the empty, staid time-lapse eulogies for late modernity of such traditional city symphonies as Hillary Harris’s \textit{Organism} (1975), Peter Hutton’s \textit{New York Portrait III} (1990), and Stephen Low’s \textit{Across the Sea of Time} (1995). Instead, it points to films like Wayne Wang and Paul Auster’s \textit{Blue in the Face} (1995), which also mixes and questions the relationship of fictional and nonfictional content, as the true inheritor of the differential city.
Certain aspects of Clarke’s own career after completing *The Cool World* likewise suggest a corrective to MacDonald and Beattie’s postmodern city symphony canon. Like the national imaginary, the dominant model of the city, and the basis of production for many city films, Clarke moved west to Los Angeles. She began teaching at The University of California at Los Angeles in 1975 and numbered among her students several members of the L.A. Rebellion. Like Clarke herself in *Cool World*, these filmmakers conveyed African American urban experiences through a mix of documentary, fictional, and avant-garde tactics that constantly skirted the boundary between fictional and nonfictional content and practiced false narration. They thereby both staged and challenged the impossibilities of narrating differential space in the crisis-city. They demonstrated that in the crisis-city “the people are missing” in order to call a new socio-spatial order into being.
Notes


2 In 1963-64, Robert Moses’ plans for the Lower Manhattan Expressway, which would have reinscribed the center-margin relation and a serial-centripetal view of the city, was defeated, Cinema 16 disbanded, Harlem suffered from skyrocketing rents until it exploded in the 1964 Riot, Penn Station was demolished, and, as Kevin Lynch and Kirkpatrick Sale argued, the modernist city in general and New York in particular were replaced in the national economy and national imaginary with sprawling sunbelt cities.


4 Dimendberg, 19-22, 189-216.


6 ibid, 165.

7 *The Connection*, DVD, directed by Shirley Clarke (1962; New York: Jazz Movie Classics, 2007); *Portrait of Jason*, DVD, directed by Shirley Clarke (1967; London: Second Run DVD, 2005). Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 2-9, 152-55. Deleuze’s best-known examples of the time image are probably Italian neo-realist films of the 1940s and early 1950s, the same period from which Dimendberg and others date “the urban crisis” or the series of major changes in socio-economic and geographic relations that rocked the American city from 1945 to the end of the 1970s. However, I differentiate “the urban crisis” from “the crisis-city,” which is a particular spatial narrative dating from the mid-1960s.

8 ibid, 129-37.


10 Wojick, 230-32

11 Clarke Papers, Box 13, Folder 9. Materials include theatrical one sheet, courtesy Wiseman Film Productions, production stills distributed as part of the film’s competition at the 1963 Venice Film Festival, and Harriet Polt’s review, “The Cool World,” *Film Quarterly* 17.2 (Winter 1963): 33-35. More recent materials in the same vein include the description of *Cool World* in the Zipporah Films (54 Lewis Wharf, Boston) rental catalog of 1983. At that time, Wiseman rented the film for $75, compared to today’s price of $300.

12 Rabinovitz, 123-28; Massood, 34-36; Carroll, 45-48.

13 Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 60, 84-85.
14 ibid, 120-31.
15 Rabinovitz, 125-6.
16 Lefebvre argues that hearing, not seeing, is the way we first encounter any environment we enter into, 138-39.
17 Deleuze, 13-25.
18 Carroll, 45.
19 Massood, Black City, 8.
20 Bazin, “Aesthetic of Reality,” 32-33; Deleuze, 18.
21 Rabinovitz, 127; Massood, “Cool,” 35; Carroll, 46. See also Polt, 34.
22 Marin, “Frontiers,” 399-402.
23 Carroll, 41-2.
24 Rabinovitz, 125, 128.
25 Lefebvre, 62.
26 ibid, 180-83.
27 Deleuze, 155.

29 Organism, DVD, directed by Hilary Harris (1975; New York: Microcinema International, 2009); New York Portrait, Part III, DVD, directed by Peter Hutton (1990; Los Angeles: Canyon Cinema, 2004); Across the Sea of Time, IMAX, directed by Stephen Low (New York: IMAX, 1995); Blue in the Face, DVD, directed by Wayne Wang and Paul Auster (1995; New York: Miramax Films, 2003). Wang and Auster’s film combines documentary, avant-garde, and fictional techniques to narrate Brooklyn’s traumatic loss of a unified concept of space and experience of space with the demolition of Dodger Stadium in 1962, and its subsequent attempt to reconstitute itself as a “borough of homes and churches” in which strangers engage each other through creative, collective works of fiction like the bull session. Though nearly diametrically opposed to Cool World in terms of tone, Blue in the Face’s ability to produce the city as an experiential space capable of narrating an alternate concept of space from within the very abyss of postmodernity itself turns on the same tactics of false narration and rejection of serial-centripetality pioneered by Clarke’s film.

30 Bruce Bebb, “The Many Media of Shirley Clarke,” Journal of the University Film and Video Association 34.4 (Spring 1982): 5-6.
31 Deleuze, 218-220.
CONCLUSION

THE CITY SIGNS ITS OWN NAME

Continue and you will see this garden and the objects (which have nothing to do with things) polyrhythmically, or if you prefer, symphonically. Instead of a collection of congealed things, you will follow each being, each body, as having above all, its time. Each therefore having its place, its rhythms, with its immediate past, a near future and hearafter.

Henri Lefebvre, “Seen From the Window”

A city symphony is not a way of seeing. A city symphony is a method for negotiating space. The New York city symphonies comprise a particular methodology in which space can be inhabited and abstracted simultaneously, in which experience and language, place and story, are one in the same at last. In the process of positioning Andy Warhol’s Empire (1964) as a city symphony, Giuliana Bruno argues that such texts “open a filmic window onto architectural space and its existence in time … engag[ing] the practice of everyday life and its production of space … the atmosphere of dailiness is a space of incorporation.”¹ Produced from the end of World War Two to the inception of postmodernity, the New York city symphonies tracked the accumulative forces and visual logics that conjoined to produce “the loftiest of cities” as, for a moment, the center of the universe it always thought it was. They kept pace with the combination of renewal, neglect, and dispersal that reduced the city to “a shabby metropolis” out of step with the country whose capital it would never be.² These films play out the central drama and dynamics of late modernity.

The early modernist tradition, especially the European city symphonies made prior to World War Two, express a fascination with speed, velocity, and acceleration. Films like Berlin: Symphony of a Great City narrate an intricately worked miniature of a city that forbids movement constitutive of appropriative space and time. Because they
produce an urban spatio-temporal order “out of joint,” or what one may call asynchronous, all time and space always already belong to the past, thereby denying the relations of production that constitute them in the present. *Berlin* insulates the unchanging core of the Renaissance supercode from any explosive encounter with or disruption by modernity, which exists only as a kind of insubstantial skin hovering over it. Steiner and Van Dyke’s American city symphony *The City* – produced on the cusp of late modernity – attempts a similar kind of insulation, producing “we the people” as a constantly mobile, trans-historical subject that cannot be changed or challenged by the envelope that is its environment. At the center of *The City*, however, is the stumbling block of New York, which forces the citizenry back into contact with their city, producing a narrative of experiential space that cannot be contained or explicated by the purely conceptual space the remainder of the film composes.

In contrast to their predecessors, the postwar New York city symphonies are not “out of joint” but rather act as joints. A joint is a point of connection between two sites that defines each in terms of the other and delimits the freedoms of action each enjoys. The late modern New York city symphonies produce such points between architectural bodies and human bodies. By articulating this connection between citizens and the built environment, the New York films act as symphonies in Lefebvre’s sense of the term, as a mode of perception that allows for the following of various beings and structures as each creates its own appropriate space.³ To produce such a link, each New York city symphony first “joints” the urban ensemble in a different way, cleaving the induced unity of serial-centripetal space, disarticulating the crucial, induced connections on which it hinges, fracturing abstract space, and intimating a new social order that might take its place. *Weegee’s New York* disentangles the space of consumption from the consumption of spaces, imagining Midtown as an amusement park and Coney Island as a civic institution. By jointing serial-centripetal space, *Weegee’s* narrates non-residential, public
spaces as constitutive of a particular social order – that of being together with strangers – and re-joins space as it is experienced to space as it is conceived.

The city symphonies that followed *Weegee’s* joint the structure of the classical European films by disarticulating documentary from experimental tactics and human from architectural portraiture. In doing so, symphonies of the margins like Levitt and Agee’s *In the Street* isolate the periphery and narrate it as differential space via the secret passages of festivals, allowing for locations ejected from the visual regime of serial-centripetality to envision themselves. For their part, symphonies of the center like Thompson’s *N.Y., N.Y.* atomize the congealed mass of the text-product and narrate the center as monument via rhythmanalysis, revealing the urban center as a creative, collective *oeuvre*.

The particular tactics on which the late modern city symphonies depend are, of course, also joined to and limited by history. Thus, both the nonsynchronous space of late modernity and the serial-centripetal logic that artificially unifies it eventually gives way to the diffuse, undifferentiated space of postmodernity. In this new spatial regime that obfuscates all points of connection – which is to say, of difference – the city symphony must respond by probing the irrationalities on which this space is built, and narrating the workings of the empty space it engenders. Thus, the New York cycle concludes with a symphony, Clarke’s *The Cool World*, which not only follows architectural bodies and human beings as they struggle and fail to occupy their own space and time, but also follows the partial structures of the symphonies of the margins and the center to the end of their differential capacity. In doing so, the film traces the edge of the gap opening in the city and its symphonies as New York enters postmodernity, once more out of joint.

If city symphonies are bounded and defined by their historical context, then their function is also directly related to the shape of the city they negotiate. City symphonies collect a cross-section of the urban socio-spatial order and organize it within the boundaries of a day. They invoke the urban environment as a closed, self-sufficient
entity; they make of each city an island. But the character and potential of that island varies from text to text. Considered as material, an island is finite, closed; it makes of the world a working model illustrative of some arrangement of mental space. Considered as the interactions of its inhabitants, as the flow of the reproduction of architectural bodies within their users, or as the ceaseless motions composed by immobile buildings, it is infinite, and enunciates myriad experiences of space.\textsuperscript{4} New York is, as physical space, already an island. Moreover, its identity as social and mental space is also predicated on its island status. This identity can produce the city as a kind of intensification and diffraction of America’s ideal and delusion of itself as a vibrant, plural, and somehow unlikely or even counterfactual social order constantly under threat and barely escaping destruction, as in E.B. White’s “Here Is New York.”\textsuperscript{5} At the same time, this identity can take the form of the neutral or the limit, a space that intervenes between and allows for the judgment of other places, but remains itself unfigurable. As humorist Spalding Gray once said, “I knew I couldn’t live in America and I wasn’t ready to move to Europe, so I moved to an island off the coast of America – New York City.”\textsuperscript{6}

The New York city symphonies consistently emphasize their subject’s status as an island, in both senses of the term. They dwell on border areas, often depicting various bodies of water from street level, foregrounding the city’s disjunction from its surroundings and narrating it as a spatially distinct, limited object. At the same time, they conjure the kind of internal markers of identity – key buildings, areas, or usual activities – that signify the endless interactions and encounters occurring within the city, and yet which can also “typify” the city as an icon and constitutive location within a national context. Although the New York films do vary widely in terms of form and style, they repeat enough of the same sights and sites – emphasized by their shared dawn-dusk structure – to themselves participate in the reproduction of New York as a physical, social, and mental island. That is, Scott MacDonald argues that they become a kind of coffee-table book of the city, cementing the grammar of New York as a series of
highlights or clichés. In keeping with their differential function, however, I argue that the films also sign the city’s name as a monogram.

The proper name is, as Susan Stewart notes, “the longing mark.” It is the nexus of the mutual exclusion of story and space, language and experience as they circulate around the construction of the self and a perception of the world. By drawing attention to individual letters that exceed their normal status as phonemes, a monogram points out both the constructed, contingent status of a name and suggests the irreducible plurality that never quite constitutes a seemingly unified subject. Moreover, because a monogram is a name produced as a shape, it is a kind of partial structure, a space that narrates the imperfection and mutual dependence of narrative and place. By exploring the typical activities of allegedly uninhabitable spaces on exceptional days or analyzing the horizon of meaning and collective participation inscribed into solid, central structures, the New York city symphonies collectively comprise a kind of urban monogram. In these films, which see symphonically – following a variety of beings and bodies in their own places and rhythms – the letters of Central Park and East Harlem, Brooklyn Bridge and Fulton’s Landing, Times Square and Coney Island are produced so that each contains an urban word, a multitude of architectural and human bodies, relations, and activities. They stand for the city, but they also narrate a city that cannot be reduced to its components because no one type of component can stand for the whole. The New York city symphonies reassemble the disparate shapes, structures, and rhythms of late modernity to synchronize the spatial practices of people and their environment and, in doing so, intimate alternative relations those people and that environment could assume. They narrate a new city, to which the masses have a right, and which is always already embedded in the extant socio-spatial order: N(ew) Y(ork) C(ity).

This project, then, is a study of the New York city symphonies as a kind of immanent utopia that challenges the common application of the term “utopia” to the films as a synonym for “naive celebratory representation of the city as perfection.” Instead,
weaving together theories of space and narrative, I have positioned the films as a kind of cinematic discourse capable of enunciating the multiple, contradictory meanings of given locations and from them positing an otherwise unfigurable, radically different social order characterized by both the perfect harmony of space as it is lived, perceived, and conceived as well as unlimited freedom. At the most basic level, this project contributes to film studies by rejecting the careless description of city symphonies as “utopian” depictions of the city and examining what it might mean to instead engage the films as utopics, or spatial plays on the extant social order, its underpinnings, and limits.

This project departed from the figure of utopia to enter a wider consideration of the relationship between space and narrative in the cinema. In introducing the concept of partiality, I elucidated the workings and import of a cinematic form in which space and narrative are co-extensive. Partiality both allowed for my reconsideration and expansion of the city symphony canon to encompass works that incorporate fictional content and, more important, suggests itself as a relation that could be applied in the future to connect diverse works across various modes of cinema. In doing so, I suggest a way for film scholarship informed by “the spatial turn” to move beyond the current concentration on the ways in which space is displaced by narrative in cinema or the ways in which film space reproduces abstract space, turning instead to a consideration of cinematic spaces that narrate and the differential space they produce. Such spaces, of course, include symphony relatives like contemporary travel narratives, but may also be found in recent commercial genre films, particularly noirs and westerns, that foreground landscape in connection with cyclic narratives. Finally, by re-reading the city symphony tradition through Lefebvre’s understanding of symphonic perception as a production of differential space, I have proposed this cinematic form as one that not only allows for the apprehension of the city as an ensemble of objects possessed of their own time and space, but also one that delineates the ways in which the city and cinema produce each other as collective works.
Notes

1 Bruno, *Public Intimacy*, 198

2 White, 162-68; Dimendberg, 1.


4 Stewart, xii.

5 White, 148-168.

6 *Swimming to Cambodia*, DVD, directed by Jonathan Demme and originally performed by Spalding Gray (1987; New York City: Cinecom Pictures, 2002).

7 MacDonald, *Garden*, 163-70.

8 Stewart, 186.

9 The monogram is arguably an intensification or abstraction of the impossible relation figured by the proper name, further distilling the name as a sign into letters that sign the name, indicating and standing in for it. But a monogram is “an inscription that is also plural.” Each letter stands for several other letters. Together they make up “the figure of a name,” as Louis Marin argues. Marin, *Utopics*, 42.

APPENDIX

FIGURES
Figure A1. The city looms above the train …

Figure A2. … And regains its medieval walls
Figure A3. The pinwheel of the sun

Figure A4. The modern pinwheel
Figure A5. El Greco, *Panorama and Map of Toledo*

Figure A6. Ebenezer Howard, Sample plan of Garden City
Figure A7. First shot of Shirley

Figure A8. First shot of Pittsburgh
Figure A9. First shot of New York

Figure A10. First shot of Greenbelt
Figure A11. “A bright light” begins to shine in “New York Fantasy”

Figure A12. The opening shot of “Coney Island”
Figure A13. Surprised by / performing for the camera

Figure A14. Helen Levitt, *Untitled*
Figure A15. Masking for Halloween

Figure A16. In the shadow of the El
Figure A17. Film in the city / the city on the marquee

Figure A18. The ziggurat
Figure A19. The ceiling of Penn Station in N.Y., N.Y.

Figure A20. The steel picket fence of abstract space
Figure A21. View of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in *Skyscraper*

Figure A22. The first shot of *The Cool World*
Figure A23. Duke swallowed by the vanishing point in Coney Island …

Figure A24. … And spit back out in Harlem


Archives Consulted

Anthology Film Archives. New York, NY, 10003.

Films viewed at Anthology: Bells of Atlantis. 16mm. Directed by Ian Hugo, 1954. Film/Video Collection, no call number; Jazz of Lights. 16mm. Directed by Ian Hugo, 1954. Film/Video Collection, no call number; N.Y., N.Y. 16mm. Directed by Francis Thompson, 1957. Film/Video Collection, no call number.

Papers viewed at Anthology: The Ian Hugo Papers. Directors’ Press and Personal Files, Jerome Hall Library, no call number.


Films viewed at MOMA: Empire. 16mm. Directed by Andy Warhol, 1964. Film Study Center, F69; Skyscraper. 16mm. Directed by Shirley Clarke, 1959. Film Study Center, F533.

The University of Iowa. Iowa City, IA, 52242.

Films viewed at Iowa: Rien que les heures. 16mm. Directed by Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926. Media Storage Collection, Motion Picture 584.

The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. Madison, WI, 53706.

Films viewed at Wisconsin: Brussels Loops. 16mm. Directed by Shirley Clarke et al., 1957. Archives Film Collections, CA 888; Feast of San Gennaro. 16mm. Directed by Weegee (Arthur Felig), 1948. Archives Film Collections, AC 291.


Filmography


